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WHERE MAO WENT WRONG: EPISTEMOLOGY
AND IDEOLOGY IN MAO'S LEFTIST POLITICS

Brantly Womack

Mao Zedong presents a political-intellectual puzzle of such monumental proportions that he will be a fruitful object of interpretation and reinterpretation for all subsequent generations of China scholarship. It is unlikely that the overall judgement of him will remain as one-sidedly negative as it is at present, and it may be anticipated that his thought, his example, and the values imbedded in his action will continue to be a significant and creative influence in Chinese politics.

This rather positive long-term view of Mao is in tension with the antipathy towards him increasingly expressed in China over the ten years since his death and amplified by Western media and China watchers. The reason for the disparity of judgements is not difficult to find. While the long-term view evaluates Mao in terms of his whole career and as a historical actor, current opinion evaluates him as a contemporary political actor who sustained a leftist current that has been decisively reversed in the post-Mao era. The new direction and values of modernisation in China imply a criticism and rejection of Mao's politics from 1957 to his death in 1976. The Chinese assessment that Mao was '70 per cent right and 30 per cent wrong' is somewhat misleading. He is viewed as 100 per cent right for 70 per cent of his career, and close to 100 per cent wrong for the last 30 per cent.

The bifurcation of Mao's career into a successful revolutionary one and a disastrous leftist denouement reconciles the long-term praise and the short-term criticism of Mao, but it raises fundamental problems for serious Mao scholarship. The dichotomy between the 'good' and the 'bad' Mao is very convenient for post-Mao Chinese orthodoxy, allowing it to uphold Mao Zedong thought (properly understood) and still reject Mao the leftist. For the scholar the alleged schizophrenia poses a number of problems. Did Mao's politics in fact change in the late 1950s? If so, how does his leftist compare to his earlier politics? Is the disjunction due to an ideological change on Mao's part, to an inconsistency in his political practice, or to a situational change that produced a new relationship between theory and practice? If one assumes (as nearly everyone does) that the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution were mistakes characteristic of Mao's new tack, where did Mao go wrong?
These questions will never be answered definitively, and a comprehensive answer would have to be based on a systematic and intensive analysis of Mao’s post-1949 works. That promising area of textual research is beyond the scope of this paper. What I propose to do is to develop an initial interpretive perspective on ‘where Mao went wrong’ that I willingly deliver up to the gnawing criticism of fellow scholars. My interpretation will be as inconvenient for the practical Chinese moderniser as his disjunction between the good and the bad Mao is for the theorist.

Granted, Mao’s leftism led to inappropriate and disastrous policies. But where Mao went wrong was not in his ‘Maoism’, the distinctive approach to politics that he developed over the course of his career, but in his ‘Marxism’, that is, his dogmatic commitment to an objectivistic Leninist-Stalinist ideological framework. Mao’s pragmatic alertness after 1949 to developments in Chinese politics was increasingly skewed by an inappropriate conceptual framework that remained unquestioned. Post-Mao China is the inheritor both of Mao’s pragmatic boldness, applied in new and more constructive directions, and of the unquestioned ideological commitment that distorted his politics. Fortunately, post-Mao politics is less consistent than Mao was, so that its orthodoxy has been less significant for the ‘middle-range politics’ of Chinese modernisation. But ideological decay leaves a debilitating residue of hypocrisy and ritual, and like the suicidal challenges posed to knights of old, orthodoxy lays political traps that catch the boldest and the best theoretical talent.

This paper is divided into four major parts. The first concerns the evaluation of Mao’s politics of the 1957-76 period as a leftist deviation. It begins with an analysis of the current orthodox view of Mao’s leftist phase and then addresses the questions of whether or not it was leftist, what mistakes were involved, and whether they were intentional. The second section considers the continuity in Mao’s political values and method. It concludes that Mao’s politics changed not because of ‘internal’ changes in Mao’s political thinking, but because of a contextual change in his perception of China’s situation after 1956. The third section discusses the turning point in Mao’s politics. Mao’s politics changed in 1957 because the completion of the transition to socialism both confirmed his confidence in his leadership and opened the question of what direction China’s socialist politics should take. Meanwhile the criticism of Stalin by Khrushchev cast doubt on the Soviet Union as a model, and the Hungarian revolution posed questions concerning the persistence of class struggle under socialism. Once the Great Leap Forward was launched and failed, policy failure and its consequences provided an additional engine of policy change. The fourth section argues that the underlying intellectual problem of Mao’s leftism was an uncritical positing of a Marxist-Leninist framework of analysis. Mao’s emphasis on correct leadership was empirically self-correcting, but success and failure were defined by an ideological framework that was assumed to be true. This was not a problem until 1957 because ideology set the intermediate goals of first revolutionary victory and then transition to socialism. But there were no intermediate, pragmatic goals because the journey from socialism to communism, and the experience of Hungary and the Soviet Union, demonstrated that dangers of derailment existed, and the failures of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution pushed Mao’s politics further into a crisis mentality. Mao was still pragmatic and mass-oriented in his last twenty years, but the inappropriateness of his interpretive framework drove his policies in ineffective and destructive directions. The conclusion returns briefly to the present-day question of the heritage of Mao’s leftist period for the post-Mao era.
I. The Problem of Mao’s Leftism

It is hardly a surprise that some people should call Mao Zedong a leftist and consider leftism a mistake. The Hunanese warlord Zhang Jingyao undoubtedly thought so when he closed down Mao’s first newspaper in 1919. But it is worthy of respectful attention that, ten years after his death, there is an official consensus among Mao’s successors in China that the last ten or twenty years of his politics were deeply harmful to China because of leftism.¹ The official position, of course, has not been constant over the decade, but my impression is that the development of public criticism of Mao since 1978 has been a gradual unveiling of a thorough condemnation of Mao’s late politics rather than an increasingly harsh judgement of him. On the other hand, Mao is respected for his contributions to the revolution and socialist construction and for his political thought. It does not seem likely that this basic evaluation of Mao will change in the foreseeable future.

There are many official and quasi-official evaluations of Mao² but special attention should be paid to the ‘Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party Since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China’ (hereafter called the Resolution), which was adopted as the official Party history of the PRC period by the Sixth Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CCP on 27 June 1981.³ This Resolution hearkens back to a similar one passed in 1945 which set the official history of the Party from 1921 to 1945 and thereby consolidated and confirmed Mao’s political hegemony within the Party. The 1981 Resolution was intended to have the same effect for the post-Mao leadership, and the most delicate part of its business is the assessment of Mao’s mistakes.

The political purpose of the Resolution is a conservative one, namely, to establish a new orthodoxy of the post-Mao leadership associated with Deng Xiaoping. It is therefore not an open-ended, exploratory essay, and its judgements fall on the ‘safe’ side of limiting implications of structural flaws or of Party errors that might possibly continue. Within the limits set by its political purpose, however, the document is a serious attempt to come to terms with recent Party history, especially the Cultural Revolution. The problem is important because of the severe disorientation caused by the reversal of a twenty-year trend in Chinese politics.

The major evaluation of Mao’s mistakes occurs in a detailed narrative of post-1949 political history (pp.13-24), but that is followed by a short, more suggestive section on ‘social and historical causes underlying the Cultural Revolution’ (pp.24-26). Similarly, the positive evaluation of Mao Zedong Thought at the end of the document includes a long catalogue of ‘components of Mao Zedong Thought’ which is essentially a collection under various categorical headings of theses which are still affirmed, and a shorter, more interesting section on ‘the living soul’ of Mao Zedong Thought. These textual features demonstrate at least an ambiguity, if not a latent disagreement, in the evaluation of Mao by the leadership in 1986. On the one hand, there is a fairly harsh personal evaluation written from the point of view of the Party establishment. On the other hand, there are suggestions of a deeper analysis which would be less harsh on Mao as a person though at least as condemnatory of leftism. The former view is much more convenient for the post-Mao leadership because it says, in effect, that Mao was wrong in his attacks on the Party establishment, and with his death and the overthrow of the Gang of Four, that leftist error is not likely to be repeated. In contrast to this Stalinist complacency, the second view sees leftism as a structural problem requiring structural reform of the party-state.⁴ Moreover, the
former view identifies leftism with the Cultural Revolution, while the latter traces it back to 1957. The latter viewpoint has gained in strength since 1981.

Even the political narrative section acknowledges that central Party leadership shared responsibility with Mao for mistakes made from 1955 to 1966. Indeed, Mao is not mentioned in connection with the excesses of the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957, a campaign that is still judged as 'entirely correct and necessary' (p.19), and the unrealistic targets of the Great Leap Forward are blamed in part on 'the fact that Comrade Mao Zedong and many leading comrades, both at the centre and in the localities, had become smug about their successes, were impatient for quick results and overestimated the role of man's subjective will and efforts' (p.19). Mao's other mistakes in this period were more personal. His criticism of Peng Dehuai and launching of a campaign against right opportunism in 1959 are mentioned, although Mao is given partial credit for starting to rectify leftist errors in 1960. But Mao 'widened and absolutized the class struggle' (p.19) in September 1962, which led to increasing leftism until the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution. In general in the pre-Cultural Revolution period, a trend is observed toward increasingly personal arbitrariness and personal cult.

The political narrative singles out four mistaken assumptions by Mao in the Cultural Revolution. The first two concern the presence of representatives of the bourgeoisie and a 'bourgeois headquarters' in the establishment. The third concerns the method of mass mobilisation, and the fourth concerns the judgement that it was a great political revolution in which one class overthrew another but which would have to be repeated. The Resolution claims that the definition of the Cultural Revolution as a class struggle was in error, that the people and the enemy were confused, that the masses participated initially because of their support for Mao and the Party and then gradually became alienated, and that it did not 'constitute a revolution or social progress in any sense, nor could it possibly have done so' (p.21). Besides the mistake of initiating the Cultural Revolution, during the 1969-73 period when Zhou Enlai corrected many of its excesses Mao continued to hold that the ultra-rightists were the primary problem. Later, although Deng Xiaoping took over Zhou's duties with Mao's support in 1975, Mao could not bear Deng's continued correction of leftist mistakes and launched a new criticism of his right deviationist trend. Finally, Mao misinterpreted the Tian An Men Incident of April 1976 and heightened the criticism of Deng. The political narrative softens these criticisms somewhat by observing that Mao rectified some specific leftist mistakes, led the effort against the Lin Biao clique, and occasionally criticised the Gang of Four.

The discussion of 'the social and historical causes of the Cultural Revolution' adds two important perspectives to the criticism of Mao. First, there was insufficient ideological differentiation between the methods and tasks appropriate in periods of revolutionary struggle and those for the continued development of socialist society. This is not simply a problem of Mao's thinking but of the fund of socialist theory and experience in general. Therefore as new problems were perceived, 'we habitually fell back on the familiar methods of largescale, turbulent mass struggle of the past' (p.25). Dogmatic reading of Marxism-Leninism 'led us to regard the error in magnifying class struggle as an act in defence of the purity of Marxism' (p.25). Secondly, Mao's progression toward more arbitrary and subjective behaviour could occur because of the lingering influence of feudal organisational habits in the Party. Therefore, 'we failed to institutionalize and legalize inner-party democracy in the political
and social life of the country, or we drew up the relevant laws but they lacked authority’ (pp.25-26).

If we critically analyse the evaluations of Mao presented above, the condemnation of Mao’s leftist in the political narrative is not particularly convincing. The Resolution duly notes but is unmoved by shared mistakes like the Great Leap Forward, even though the destruction of life and production caused by the Leap was greater than that caused by the Cultural Revolution, and the Anti-Rightist Campaign – just as terrible for its victims as the Cultural Revolution – is defended. It is when Mao attacks his current judges that he is strongly condemned. The Resolution explicitly claims that the four erroneous theses of the Cultural Revolution are present in the ‘May 16 Circular’ of 1966, which is an exaggeration. It is clear from the Central Committee’s Decision of 8 August 1966 that the chaos of the Cultural Revolution and the scope of its criticism were unanticipated. In brief, then, the criticism of Mao in the political narrative section of the Resolution could as easily be a polemic of the ultimate victors in a power struggle with Mao as a principled critique of leftist mistakes.

The ‘social and historical causes of the Cultural Revolution’ are more persuasive, but they appear to be true for the entire post-1949 period. This section presents plausible explanations of both the leftist political mistakes that occurred and of the institutional weaknesses that allowed Mao to act as an imperial revolutionary. But precisely because the inadequacy of ideology and the influence of feudalism are general explanations, they do not isolate Mao as the mistake maker and the Cultural Revolution as the great mistake. Indeed, Mao’s leftist politics appear as symptoms of general Party or communist leftist – a correctable ideological-structural weakness, perhaps, but not reducible to an individual deviation. Why Mao went wrong is much clearer in this section, but where he went wrong as an individual is left to the narrative section.

The above summary of the orthodox criticism of Mao and the Cultural Revolution demonstrates the importance of the critique of Mao’s leftist for post-Mao politics, but is not satisfactory from the point of view of Mao scholarship as a critical analysis. We must therefore return to some basic questions of evaluation. First, was Mao a leftist? If his politics were, for instance, an expression of a peasant point of view, then we could be viewing the situation from the wrong plane of analysis. Secondly, does Mao’s decision-making after 1957 demonstrate faults that are not characteristic of his earlier politics? I will argue that the two basic faults of Mao’s leftist are an authoritarian optimism and dogmatism, and that these faults led to policy outcomes that even he disapproved of. I will therefore be arguing that Mao went wrong by his own standards. This last statement requires an elucidation of how Mao responded to the unanticipated consequences of his interventions, something not raised in the Resolution because it is concerned with Mao’s responsibility for political mistakes rather than his intentions.

Chinese terms for political directions are sufficiently ambiguous and politically loaded to raise questions about what it means to term Mao a leftist. Certainly Mao would consider himself a leftist, and he expected socialist politics to require leftist struggle. As he put it in 1957, ‘During the period of socialist revolution in our country the contradiction between the people and the bourgeois Rightists, who oppose the Communist Party, the people and socialism, is one between ourselves and the enemy, that is, an antagonistic, irreconcilable, life-and-death contradiction.’ But, as observed in an earlier footnote, there is a difference in China between being a leftist
and being a 'leftist'. The former is a proletarian revolutionary while the latter is someone prone to subjectivism, dogmatism and adventurism. If Mao were not a 'leftist' then the current regime would be rightist in its policy changes. The last person to make this claim publicly in China was Jiang Qing at her trial. If Mao erred to the left, as the Resolution argues, then the post-Mao regime is properly left rather than rightist or middle of the road, even though its major targets of criticism are to its left and it sees itself as facing opposition on two fronts. So within Chinese political terminology Mao is either left or 'left'; he is certainly not right (there is no 'right' because all right is wrong).

But there are planes of analysis other than the left-right dichotomy. Maurice Meisner and others find the description of Mao as a populist, as a rural revolutionary or as a utopian more meaningful, and certainly interpretations of this sort have added much depth and texture to the appreciation of Mao's politics. However, it would be difficult to claim that Mao was a populist instead of a leftist, especially in the post-1957 period. Mao called for maximum public ownership and control, minimising of all social differences, mass participation, and total struggle with the bourgeoisie. Although Mao's rural revolutionary background colours these policies, it is easy to see why Mao had an appeal to urban radicals in developed Western countries in the 1960s. As Stuart Schram has persuasively argued, Mao's actions in the Cultural Revolution demonstrated his commitment to Marxist-Leninist organisation and ideology. He was not willing to have the Party destroyed or to have it replaced by the army, and he did not abjure modernisation in favour of rural values. Although Mao's politics are not one-dimensional, I think that there can be little question that after 1957 they were on the left.

The next question is whether or not Mao's leftism was a mistake. I would argue that Mao's major policy initiatives of the post-1957 period failed to accomplish what he intended, and their unanticipated consequences forced him into further actions that were undesirable from the perspective of his leftist values. By contrast, Mao's politics from 1926 to 1956 were by and large successful, and even the failures led to more robust improvements. To illustrate my point, the disruption and famine caused by the Great Leap Forward were certainly not its intended results, and Mao agreed to the retrenchment policies out of necessity rather than preference. Since the action produced unpleasant consequences and led to a diminished opportunity for preferred action, it can be judged a failure from the vantage point of Mao's own initial intentions. The same can be said of the Cultural Revolution. Its chaos forced Mao to rely on the army to control mass factions, and eventually to fight Lin Biao, restore the old Party leaders, and operate through a balancing of antagonistic factions. It is safe to say that this is not what Mao intended. A new proletarian culture was not established, nor was the bourgeoisie eliminated, nor was a successful model for the periodic removal of bourgeois elements developed. If Mao had it to do over again, it is difficult to imagine him doing it the same way. And in these two cases, hindsight does not suggest a way that could work. If Mao himself would not have gone the same way again, then he went wrong in the first place.

There are two novel characteristics of Mao's politics in the post-1957 period that I think are directly responsible for his leftist mistakes. The first fault is authoritarian optimism. Optimism was not a typical characteristic of Mao's politics. Mao's whole rural revolutionary strategy was a rather cautious and enveloping one. He resented the wasting of his forces by the adventurism of Li Lisan and the 28 Bolsheviks, and later by Wang Ming's trustfulness of the Guomindang. At no time did he promise
anything other than prolonged struggle against Japan. He overestimated the duration of the civil war by several years, and until 1956 he expected socialist transformation to take longer than it did. I can recollect only two occasions where history gave him less than he expected. The first was the May Fourth Movement, when he expected a new era to be ushered in by the great shout of the popular masses, and the second was the mighty tide of peasant revolution in 1927 that he forecast in his famous ‘Hunan Report’. Both of these disappointments occasioned major organisational and policy shifts. Starting with the Anti-Rightist Campaign, however, there is a new tone of programmatic optimism that used promises of future transformations to justify current actions and, regardless of the actual consequences, is never publicly proven wrong.

I call this fault ‘authoritarian optimism’ because the overestimation of the situation is compounded by the utilisation of the media monopoly for propaganda rather than for information. China did not become a media society until the late 1950s with the establishment of the wired radio broadcasting system, and the new control was used for the production of an unquestionable image of success and accomplishment as well as for mass mobilisation. Policy became a victim of its own guaranteed success as local leaders outdid themselves with unrealistic goals and falsified accomplishments. Because of the costs of resistance and failure, even internal informational systems became completely distorted during the Great Leap Forward, with disastrous consequences. The effects of media control were even more bizarre during the Cultural Revolution — well symbolised by Mao’s statement at its nadir that ‘the situation is excellent.’

The second fault behind Mao’s leftist mistakes was dogmatism. From 1957 Mao’s primary policy concern was correctness of line rather than practical accomplishment. Mao viewed dogmatism and rightist opportunism as juxtaposed evils, and from 1957 he considered the right the major threat to the socialist revolution. He did not rule out the possibility of problems with leftist dogmatism; at one point he said that it was not a major problem because it had not yet become a systematic line. China’s major problem was ‘which direction to take? One road leads to socialism and the other to capitalism. The rightists want us to turn around and take the capitalist road.’ One might say that Mao took a calculated risk of dogmatism in his stance against the right.

But the problem of Mao’s dogmatism after 1957 is more serious than Mao presents it, and it is in great contrast to his previous politics. Mao did not see dogmatism as a ‘line’ because it formed his own paradigm for viewing and judging politics. Something basic in the relationship of theory and practice in Mao’s politics changed in these years. Although Mao did not abandon production as a goal or adopt a ‘bad is good’ attitude toward material prosperity, he was willing to countenance such statements as ‘put destruction first, and in the process you have construction’, and he was not willing to engage in a fundamental review of leftist policies. Mao remained practical enough to backpedal, but not to consider changing direction. The problem was, as I will discuss below, that a change of direction was precluded by his ideological framework.

The problem of Mao’s responsiveness to policy outcomes demonstrates both the unanticipated nature of the consequences and Mao’s determined commitment to a leftist policy direction. In the late 1950s Mao developed what I would call an imperial revolutionary style. This resulted in part from self-confidence due to previous successes, and in part from a heightened sense of personal responsibility for the fate
of socialism in China. Thus in his leftist interventions Mao swept down from the high ground of authority and ideology, and few were foolish enough to oppose him openly. But there were also periods in which Mao withdrew from active involvement, and even times when he was active in changing policy outcomes that he caused, so a clear distinction should be drawn between responsibility and intention. The former is more important to politics, and therefore to the Resolution on Party History, but the latter is more important to understanding Mao.

II. The Second-Order Continuity of Mao’s Politics

The foregoing discussion of Mao’s politics from 1957 agrees with the Resolution that there was a disjunction in Mao’s politics, that this was a move to the left both in a policy sense and with the connotation of adventurism and dogmatism, and that the change led to disastrous policies that were then modified but not reversed. The next question to be addressed is to what extent the political shift represented a change in Mao’s thinking. Discontinuity in action does not necessarily imply discontinuity in values or intellectual method, because the same values and method applied to changed circumstances can lead to different patterns of action. In order to explore the question of the second-order continuity in Mao’s thought, we must put problems of situational differences and policy results to one side and concentrate on the values and methods implicit in his politics. If one performs this phenomenology of intentions, the surprising result is that the basic elements of Mao’s thought continue with little change into the leftist phase of his politics. In short, Mao did not change his mind and turn leftist. The circumstances he dealt with changed, and intellectual consistency required his politics to become leftist.

First, Mao’s politics before and after 1957 were based on the conviction that the mobilised power of the masses is the ultimate political force. It is not surprising that Mao faced the challenge of rightism within the Party after 1957 by going to the masses and mobilising them for for criticism. In 1957 Mao declared the ‘four big freedoms’ – ‘speaking out freely, airing views fully, holding great debates, and writing big-character posters’ – to be the ‘form well suited to the content’ of socialist revolution.15 Mao further encouraged a mass-oriented political style and openness to criticism in his speech on democratic centralism in 1962.16

The ultimate appeal to the masses was Mao’s urging of the Red Guards to ‘bombard the headquarters’. Although the policies themselves were novel, Mao’s reliance on the mobilisation of the masses, and his conviction that they are the base by which Party virtue and power can be renewed, are values and methods older than his Marxism.17 The lack of any institutional guarantees of mass voice or of citizen rights – what John Starr calls a ‘participatory dictatorship’ – is also characteristic of Mao’s base-area politics.18 A possibly new aspect of Mao’s view of the masses is his tendency to talk of them after 1957 as a malleable middle between left and right minorities.19 The assumption that the masses are malleable is not new, but this formulation appears to denigrate mass creativity.

Secondly, Mao’s orientation toward effective action, investigation, and experimentation can be seen in Mao’s post-1957 politics. This claim might be disputed because of the lack of realism in Mao’s expectations concerning the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, but even those policies had models of empirical success. It must be granted, however, that Mao was less concerned about the practicality of policy after 1957, and his empirical models seemed more excuses for policy
rather than the careful trial and error of base-area days. The following is a good example:

Cite just one cooperative that is being managed successfully, and you will be able to explode all the absurd arguments against cooperation. If this cooperative can be run well, why can’t others? . . . Of course, it is fine if you have scores of examples, but if you can make just one cooperative work well, that spells success. 20

This attitude quickly produced an intense political pressure for successful models at all costs, and the political and propaganda value of the models distorted their empirical content and salience. The most tragic case of this was Chen Yonggui and the Dazhai Brigade. Nevertheless, Mao’s commitment to effective policy can be seen in the adjustments made in his leftist initiatives. He often said that China had insufficient experience with socialism and that mistakes were inevitable, but this did not make him less bold. In general, then, ‘seeking truth from facts’ remained a value for Mao, but it was modified to accommodate very novel experimentation.

A third value with a strong continuity into Mao’s leftist phase was the importance of class struggle. Although the role of class struggle was sometimes masked in earlier periods by united front policy, it is clear from Mao’s class analyses of the 1920s that he viewed society as a reality composed of classes, and social change as the product of class struggle. 21 His concept of classes after 1957 became more stereotyped and removed from a basis in economic reality, but his utilisation of class analysis was not novel. Theoretically more novel, had it been developed and applied, was the discussion of antagonistic and non-antagonistic contradictions and the suggestion that politics, rather than class, could change one into the other. 22 Unfortunately, the Anti-Rightist Campaign and later the Cultural Revolution tended to turn every difference into a matter of line and therefore of class. But the assumptions that the revolutionaries should build their class alliance up from the bottom, that the Party and the masses are fundamentally in symbiosis, and that there may be alliances but no compromises in the class struggle are principles long held by Mao.

It would be possible to discuss other theoretical continuities in Mao’s thought, but I think that the point is made that Mao’s leftist phase was not defined by a change in his convictions. Indeed, the fairly high level of second-order continuity in Mao’s thought makes possible research, like Starr’s, which discusses Mao’s thought without reference to policy development. Changes and re-emphasis can be seen, especially if we peek through our fingers at the different roles of values in policy. But it can be said that the development in Mao’s values and intellectual approach, as distinguished from his politics, would in itself be insufficient to define a leftist stage in his development. Therefore, we can expect a major change in his perception of the context of his politics.

**III. The Turning Point**

The change in Mao’s politics in 1957 is associated with a number of major changes in the Chinese political environment, or at least the environment as Mao perceived it. The completion of the transition to socialism was the most important change, but it was reinforced by Khrushchev’s criticism of Stalin, the Hungarian Revolution, the failure of the Hundred Flowers Campaign, and the apparent success of agricultural co-operativisation. Together, these factors put Mao in a heightened position of authority in a situation where he lacked relevant experience of his own and could no longer rely on a foreign model. Moreover, he came to the situation with
a sense of ideological danger to the revolution, a feeling that became stronger with
the failure of the Great Leap Forward. He was thus driven by failure to even more
extreme intervention. Throughout all of this, Mao’s basic political orientation
remained the same. In fact, it could be said that consistency was Mao’s problem,
since his ideology required him to fight ineluctable tendencies and to seek
unattainable goals. Part of the reason for his consistency was the fact that his earlier
success had created the new situation, which was first perceived not as a crisis but as
a great opportunity, and this left him understandably even more committed to his old
values and ideology.

With the completion of the transition to socialism Mao had accomplished the
second major political task of his career, the first being victory in 1949. Like victory,
the transition to socialism posed fairly clear material and organisational tasks. These
were summed up in the Party’s general task for the transition to socialism: ‘basically
to accomplish the country’s industrialization and the socialist transformation of agri-
culture, handicrafts and capitalist industry and commerce over a fairly long period of
time’.23 Not only did transition set fairly clear targets, but there was also the example
and advice of the Soviet Union, which had completed its transition to socialism in
1936. Due to unexpected success in industrialisation and co-operativisation,
transition to socialism was declared completed in 1957 in China, much earlier than
originally anticipated.

The achievement of socialism was far more than just another milestone in
China’s development. The structure of China’s politics and economy had been
worked out for the transitional phase. The economy was a mixed economy with mar-
eting under state control and ever more pressure on the private sector. Politics was
especially a continuation of united front politics of the pre-1949 period. The 1954
Constitution was based on the Common Program drafted by the Chinese People’s
Consultative Conference on the eve of 1 October 1949. More importantly, the Con-
stitution was specifically written for the transition to socialism; it did not claim to be
a permanent public contract.24 The Soviet Union presumably could serve as an
example for China’s socialist politics, but it could no longer serve as a guide since it
itself had not completed the transition from socialism to communism. And in fact the
Soviet Union was extremely problematic even as an example. Khrushchev’s criti-
cism of Stalin at the Twentieth Party Congress of the CPSU had made both the past
and the present leadership of the Soviet Union look bad. So China, with Mao as its
phenomenally successful leader, stood at the edge of its historical development with-
ut a model and with the new task of moving from socialism to communism.

This was a heady time. The documents of the Eighth Party Congress of Septem-
ber 1956 expressed the triumphant optimism of the time, and the policy of encour-
gaging discussion led to many new ideas and criticisms of current practices. Many
people realised that China and the Party stood at a directional watershed and they
wanted to make sure that they influenced decisions. Some thought that, if class
struggle is a thing of the past under socialism, then a more democratic form of
popular government should be organised. Deng Biwu, for example, thought that it
was time to move from revolutionary justice to an institutionalised socialist legal
system.25 Others, including the authors of the Report of the Eighth Party Congress,
thought that the main problem under socialism would be the improvement of pro-
ductive forces, in other words, economic tasks.

However, by the summer of 1957 the mood of optimism had turned to one of
ideological crisis. There had been some disturbances, strikes and wild statements,
and the Party’s unease at these threats to its leadership was heightened by the disturbances in Hungary and Poland. Khrushchev appeared to be in the process of a wholesale abandonment not only of Stalin but of Lenin (as Mao understood him) as well. Under these circumstances Mao decided that revisionism was a greater danger than dogmatism within the Party, and that bourgeois rightism, primarily carried by intellectuals, remained a significant threat both outside and inside the Party. By October 1957, barely one year after the Eighth Party Congress, he had explicitly repudiated its bland economic orientation and asserted that the principal contradiction was between socialism and capitalism. Whereas hitherto the proletariat had led the masses in struggling against feudalism and imperialism, now the spearhead was to be directed against the bourgeoisie.

The immediate effect of the reorientation was of course the Anti-Rightist Campaign, but its influence went much deeper. A discussion of Mao’s idea of revisionism can illustrate its deeper effects.

Revisionism is one form of bourgeois ideology. The revisionists deny the difference between socialism and capitalism, between the dictatorship of the proletariat and the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. What they advocate is in fact not the socialist line but the capitalist line. In present circumstances, revisionism is more pernicious than dogmatism.

The blanket critique of revisionism as blurring the line between capitalism and socialism makes suspect the utilisation of any modern social forms existing in the West. Since the Soviet Union was also clearly moving in a revisionist direction, China would have to explore new forms of socialism, guided only by the principles of Marxism-Leninism and the negative examples of capitalism and revisionism. To the extent, therefore, that in reality capitalist forms represented a coping with general problems of modern societies, China would be kicking against the traces out of ideological commitment. To stop kicking against the traces would be to go the capitalist road. Although the ideological orientation is not new to Mao’s thought, earlier it was buffered in its political application by the intermediate, practical goals of revolutionary victory and transition to socialism.

The political implications of the direct derivation of politics from ideology are obvious with hindsight. First, the united front is an inappropriate form for socialist politics so conceived. Former alliance partners have now become a threat. The suddenness of this change in Mao’s politics can be seen in contrasting his warm words of welcome to the democratic parties and affirmation of the united front in his opening address to the Eighth Party Congress, and his vicious condemnation of Wen hui bao nine months later. The tendency to purify the revolutionary ranks was carried to an extreme in the factionalism of the Cultural Revolution. Secondly, institutional solutions to political problems were suspect. The legal, political and constitutional institutionalisation that flourished from 1954 to 1956 had died on the vine by 1958. The Ministry of Justice was closed from 1959 to 1977, and judicial decisions were made directly by Party secretaries until 1979. Ironically, the husks of formal organs and procedures remained, because the problem was not with the particular institutions themselves but with institutions in general. The power of the masses should not be fettered, and therefore China was not a constitutional state from 1957 to 1977. Thirdly, there was a great increase in political tension. To some extent this was consciousness-raising: the political implications of actions that were not directly political were brought to light. But there was no relief from the possibility of hostile interpretation, and no actions were incontrovertible, practical advancements of socialism. The best defence was inactivity and repetition of the current line. The
grand master of invidious interpretation was Kang Sheng. On one memorable occasion he took an impassioned statement of support for Mao by an ultra-left group and turned it into an attack on Mao supported by Soviet and American imperialism. True to the Maoist-Daoist dialectic, the lack of political security brought on by ideological purification led to the growth of opportunistic factions.

In general, we can look at the watershed of 1957 from two different but complementary perspectives. From the perspective of Mao’s basic political thought, he simply continued the revolutionary struggle that he had begun in 1919 under the new circumstances of socialist revolution. At this level there was little questioning of fundamental values, nor was there a suspension of their application to politics. But from the perspective of political effect Mao’s politics was turned on its head. The revolutionary struggle was now led from above, by theory and authority, rather than from below, by practical achievement and united front mobilisation. Therefore, instead of the pragmatic caution and political mildness that Mao had exhibited vis-à-vis earlier dogmatists like the 28 Bolsheviks, Mao’s new leftist policies were characterised by authoritarian optimism and dogmatism.

IV. Did Mao Think Far Enough?

We are now in a position to address the root problem of this paper, namely the intellectual origins of Mao’s determined maladaptation to the phase of socialism. Even if Mao’s political thought did not go wrong in the sense of changing in a wrong direction, but simply became wrong through application to different circumstances, the inability of Mao to adjust to a more appropriate response to changed circumstances reflects a rigidity that must be considered a flaw. This is especially true for Mao, because the pragmatic orientation of his thought toward situationally appropriate leadership was somehow inverted to produce inappropriate leadership. His concentration on the problematic relationship of theory and practice turned into a terrorisation of practice by theory. I argue that the reason for this transformation was the uncritical relationship of Mao’s political thought to an objectivistic version of Marxism-Leninism. This ideological ceiling of Mao’s thought was inappropriate to the post-1957 situation, and Mao’s fidelity to it led him to more extreme measures rather than a reconsideration of his framework.

I have argued elsewhere that the focus of Mao’s thought was the problem of correct, situationally appropriate leadership. Mao was not only more concerned with the problems of social superstructure of the economic base, he was particularly attentive to the interactive, political nature of the relationship of leadership and masses. In taking the problems of political leadership seriously, Mao had to address political problems that had been taken for granted by Marx and Lenin. The problems of building political, military and economic power in rural areas against a much stronger government were not imagined by Mao’s ideological mentors, but they were matters of life or death for Mao. Survival in the base areas depended on avoiding separation from the masses and mobilising them in campaigns that integrated mass and Party interests. This very difficult, practical task of leadership demanded investigation of concrete conditions, eagerness to correct mistakes, and flexibility of policy. A dogmatic approach that would make light of the real cognitive and attitudinal challenges of appropriate leadership would be dangerously misleading. The revolutionary leader had to cope with a very complex and changing reality, a situation that demanded boldness, expected mistakes, and respected experience. The
pragmatic epistemology resulting from the pragmatics of leadership is insightfully presented in ‘On Practice’ and ‘On Contradiction’, and its logic lies close under the surface of all of Mao’s works.

But pragmatism is not self-orienting, nor can it correct its own orientation. Logically implicit in its effort to change an external, objective world is the confidence that the actor is properly oriented toward that world. Practical reason expects the objective world to be tricky, difficult, slow to change and yet full of surprises, but it also expects the world to be out there, and it assumes that the purposes that it brings as tasks can be fulfilled. At some level it assumes that its theory is correct. Common sense pragmatism takes its cues from the societal environment. What no one questions is assumed to be true. Mao’s pragmatism was revolutionary pragmatism, and its orientation was set by his understanding of Marxism-Leninism. In order to be the gyroscope of his practical activities, it had to be true ‘out there’. It had to be a science, the best and most advanced knowledge from the West, with all the mystique that Mr Science had in twentieth-century China. Mao’s Marxism-Leninism would have tended toward uncritical objectivism because of the use he made of it even without Stalin, but with Stalin Mao had available a prefabricated orthodoxy. After 1949 the role of orthodoxy was further enhanced by the Chinese tradition of secular state orthodoxy, and Mao’s role was enhanced by the examples of Lenin and Stalin, as well as by imperial shadows.

Although Mao and the dogmatists had in common an uncritical acceptance of an orienting ideological framework, they differed greatly in their utilisation of ideology. Three different dogmatic flaws can be distinguished. The first, which never attracted Mao, is pedantry, ideology an und fuer sich. These are the people who ‘merely stroke the arrow [of Marxism-Leninism] fondly, exclaiming, “What a fine arrow! What a fine arrow!”, but never want to shoot it’. This sort of academic Marxism (which flourished in China after 1927) was basically irrelevant to the revolution.

The second sort, which was far more troublesome to Mao, was the utilisation of ideology to override the necessity of concrete investigation and appropriate leadership. The assumption was that since ideology was true it contained the answers to concrete problems. As Mao puts it, ‘There is a muddled idea among many comrades about “linking theory and practice”, but actually they mean “separating”, because they make no effort at linking’. In other words, these dogmatists (whom Mao calls subjectivists) do not view the linking of theory and practice as a problem needing concrete investigation, they view it as a derivative task from theory. For them the problem of correct leadership is one of ideologically pure leadership, not one of situationally appropriate leadership. ‘Linking’ theory and practice in this sense actually means separating them because theory simply overrides practice. This analysis faces Mao with the delicate theoretical task of explaining how ideologically pure leadership can be inappropriate. He tackles this problem brilliantly in ‘On Contradiction’ by arguing that the particularity of contradictions is universal. If each contradiction is particular then its resolution cannot be derived from the solution of higher contradictions; it must be studied concretely and resolved in its own terms. Mao’s relationship to this sort of dogmatism did shift in 1957. A philosophical symptom was his reduction of dialectics to the law of the unity of opposites, a principle whose protean potential is easily put to the service of subjectivism.

A third sort of dogmatism is the unwillingness to subject the theoretical framework of action to criticism. Mao was a dogmatist in this sense. Although he did not derive practical tasks from dogma, he also did not use experience as a practical
critique of dogma. Mao was able to distance his leadership from dogmatic concerns by the utilisation of intermediate, practical goals as a criterion of action – for instance, revolutionary survival and success, and later the economic and organisational requirements of transition to socialism. Mao could evade the problem of finding a footnote in Marx for everything that he did because revolutionary success was certainly a Marxist goal and he could explain his practical behaviour (and criticise that of the dogmatists) in terms of its effectiveness for success. Intermediate goals were set by ideology and they provided adequate guidance for pragmatic leadership – until 1957.

But China's success by 1957 and the troubles of the Soviet Union left Mao with only Marxist ideals and his own successful experience as guides for a much broader role of political leadership, namely, to find the Chinese path to communism. The situation coaxed and impelled him into the imperial revolutionary role, and the ceiling placed on his political thought by Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy became a trap which grew tighter through the efforts of his pragmatism. Neither base-area experience nor Marxism-Leninism suggested that collective leadership or a limited state were advisable, and the case of Khrushchev as well as the fallout from the Great Leap Forward convinced him that he was steering China along a precipice. His alertness to problems of political leadership made it impossible for him to ignore the emerging problems caused by Party hegemony, but his framework and vocabulary for interpreting these problems remained Marxist-Leninist. Therefore the deteriorating Party-mass relationship was perceived as a class struggle composed of personal deviations rather than as an organisational problem requiring an institutional solution. The deteriorating situation merely intensified ideological hegemony to the point of paranoia.

The crucial question is why Mao's attention to situationally appropriate leadership could not rescue him from leftist mistakes after 1957. Of course, in a limited sense it did, because he retreated from policies once it was clear that they were failures. But there was no gradual approximation, through trial and error, of a generally successful policy. Instead of a cycle of experiential corrections, as described in 'On Practice', in which each succeeding policy iteration is improved by the errors of the previous, there occurred a vicious circle of failure, crisis, occasional retreat, but ultimately more extreme intervention. The reason for the difference was not a new impracticality on Mao's part, but a change in adjustment criteria. Instead of an intermediate practical criterion like survival, Mao operated under an ideological criterion. Pragmatism under this standard meant the improvement of ideological purity and the elimination of bourgeois influences. Mao remained alert to the problematic relationship of theory and practice, but now he defined situationally appropriate leadership in ideological terms. And as the practical situation deteriorated, the ideological demands put on leadership grew more urgent.

If we reflect on the situation just described, we can see that both Mao's alertness to problems of political leadership and his uncritical utilisation of his Marxist-Leninist ideological framework contributed to his leftism. If his commitment to the closeness of leadership and masses had atrophied, he could have accepted the Stalinist dictum that history moves socialism beyond such problems. If he had perceived the problems caused by Party hegemony outside of a Marxist-Leninist framework, the obviously institutional character of the problem might have led to an institutional solution. Even the Great Leap Forward, Maoist as it was, depended on
assumptions about the practicality of a communal future that Mao accepted as scientific fact.

Of course, the hypothetical scenarios of either an unMarxist Mao or an unMaoist Mao are thoroughly unrealistic. Mao's commitment to correct political leadership and to Marxism-Leninism were closely bonded at least from 1927, and the organisational embodiment of that bond was the Chinese Communist Party. But the analytical fiction is useful because it enables a closer judgement as to where Mao went wrong. Orthodox compacency would say that Mao went wrong in the problems that he raised; a more challenging perspective is that Mao went wrong in not going far enough with his questions. If he had gone beyond the assumptions of class struggle and the unimportance of institutions and taken the welfare of the masses or of China as an ultimate standard of leadership, perhaps the inadequacies of ideology could have been criticised and improved through practice. Be that as it may, it is clear that consistency within an inappropriate framework is more destructive than inconsistency within the same framework, or consistency within an appropriate one.

Conclusion: The Theoretical Legacy of Post-1957 Maoism

This paper has argued that Mao's basic political values and outlook did not change in his leftist period, but that his politics became disorientated through a more direct relationship with his Marxist-Leninist ideology. Mao's leftist was not a departure from 'Maoism'. The three values praised by the Resolution on Party History as the 'living soul of Mao Zedong Thought': mass line, seeking truth from facts and independence, continued to operate after 1957. These are important values, but Mao's own experience demonstrates that in themselves they are no guarantee against authoritarian optimism and dogmatism. As long as they were in service of an intermediate, practical goal they produced effective, pragmatic political leadership. However, when the standards of leadership became an objectivist and uncritical Marxist-Leninist ideology, Mao's alertness, consistency and energy pushed Chinese politics in directions that were detrimental to the material and political well-being of the country. There were numerous positive residues of Mao's leftist policies, but the central intentions of the policies were not fulfilled.

The grand solution of the post-Mao era to Mao's leftist is the re-establishment of an intermediate practical goal for politics. Modernisation has the same function for post-Mao politics that revolutionary victory and socialist transformation had before 1957. It is a proximate policy goal that sets practical standards for judging the suitability of particular policies. Certainly Chinese politics has been as innovative and flexible under the standard of modernisation as it was earlier in the pursuit of revolutionary success, and, as in the revolutionary period, the regime's policy depends on the material interests and, to some extent, the initiative of the masses. Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy and the Chinese Communist Party are still allowed sacred and privileged positions, but the effect of orthodoxy is increasingly removed from practical policy and the Party has committed itself to a more institutionalised and self-disciplined form of rule.

There is also some tentative movement toward a reconsideration of China's ideological framework. It has often been said over the past few years that Marxism does not have all the answers to problems of the contemporary era and that Chinese theorists should be bold and creative in their thinking. Liao Guilong's essay on Party history is an excellent example of frank and creative thinking, and he does not
hesitate to point out weaknesses in Lenin's political thought that lay behind the Cultural Revolution's interpretation of class struggle. Such theorising does not go beyond Marxism, but it does not start from the premises of Marxist dogmatism. The high Party leadership has been torn between the familiarity and comfort of orthodoxy and the boldness of ideological innovation. Official criticism of the theory of alienation during the campaign against spiritual pollution in 1983-84 showed the danger of boldness, but on the other hand the abortion of that campaign and subsequent developments showed the limited power of ideological orthodoxy. The ebb and flow of reformist exploration and conservative counter-attack continues. The call for 'political institutional reform' evoked some very challenging reformist essays in the second half of 1986, but the ensuing student demonstrations provided an excuse for a conservative counter-attack. The 'struggle against bourgeois liberalism' that began in January 1987 is the most successful conservative move of the post-Mao period, but it is not likely to remain unchallenged.

The conservative fear of reformist theorising is understandable. Ideological innovation and critique are threatening because they appear to be a leap into the unknown, and a return to a direct political relevance for ideology. But a more open and diverse intellectual atmosphere is the only long-term remedy for the dangers of dogmatism, because it encourages institutionalisation and democracy to play a more important role in setting the criteria for politics.

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NOTES

1 A terminological nuance should be noted at the outset. To be left is always good in China, and the opposite is true for being right. To say that someone or some policy is on the right is therefore a hostile statement, and one rarely sees the word used in a political sense in the post-Mao period. Left is good, but too much 'left' is not good, and sometimes there is false 'leftism'. When 'left' is used in this pejorative sense in Chinese, it is always in quotation marks. Since the term is almost always used pejoratively nowadays, it is rarely seen without quotation marks. I feel that it would verge on ideological pedantry to preserve this quirk of Chinese orthodoxy in translation, so no quotation marks are used.

2 Official criticism of Mao was implied in the publication of his 'Talks at an Enlarged Work Conference'. *Peking Review*, vol.21, no.27 (7 July 1978), pp.6-22, because in this 1962 work Mao makes a self-criticism. The first official criticism was in Ye Jianying's speech, *Beijing Review*, vol.22, no.40 (5 October 1979), pp.7-22, on the thirtieth anniversary of the PRC. Other major evaluations are Deng Xiaoping, *Beijing Review*, vol.26, no.30 (25 July 1983), pp.14-20, and Huang Kechang, *Beijing Review*, vol.24, no.17 (2 May 1981), pp.15-19. The most wide-ranging and provocative evaluation of Mao was not published in China but became available through Taiwan. That is Liao Gailong, 'Lishi de jingyan he women de fazhan daolu' [Historical experience and our developmental path], a speech given on 25 October 1980 to the Conference on Party Historiography of the National Party School. It is reprinted in *Zhonggong yanjiu* [Research on Chinese Communism], vol.15, no.9 (15 September 1981), pp.108-77.


4 This view is elaborated in detail by Liao Gailong, fn 2.
The 'May 16 Circular' was a document bitterly condemning Peng Zhen's management of the Cultural Revolution. Some of its criticisms correspond roughly to the four 'mistaken theses', but it is a specific criticism of Peng's 'Group of Five' rather than a programme for the Cultural Revolution. It was distributed down to the county level but was not made public until a year later, with the claim that it was edited by Mao. I suspect from its style that it was written by Kang Sheng. See 'May 16 Circular', *Important Documents on the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution* (Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, 1970); Giovanni Blumer, *Die chinesische Kulturrevolution 1965-1967* (Europäische Verlagsanstalt, Frankfurt, 1968), pp.88-89.


For an overview of Chinese media development, see Brantly Womack, 'Introduction', in *Media and the Chinese Public* (M.E.Sharpe, Armonk, 1986), pp.6-54.


ibid., pp.459-60.

'May 16 Circular', p.119.


Mao, 'Talk at an Enlarged Working Conference', *Peking Review*, vol.21, no.27 (7 July 1978), pp.6-22.

For the development of Mao's political thought, see Womack, *Foundations of Mao Zedong's Political Thought, 1917-1935* (University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1982).


Deng Biwu, 'Jin yi bu jiaqiang renmin minzhu fazhi, baozhang shenhuihui shi jianshe shiye' [Further strengthen the people's democratic legal system, guarantee the task of socialist construction], in *Deng Biwu xuanji* [Selected works of Deng Biwu] (Renmin Chubanshe, Beijing, 1985), pp.406-22.


Hegel in his *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences* puts practical reason as the next step after theoretical reason, because theoretical reason assumes a disjunction between subjective and objective, while practical reason assumes that the disjunction can be mediated by will. The *Aufhebung* of the two, the realisation that the rationality of subjective and objective is the same, is the insight into necessity, or freedom. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften* (Felix Meiner Verlag, Hamburg, 1959), ‘Die Psychologie’, sections 440-82.

Mao, ‘Rectify the Party’s Style of Work’ (1 Feb.1942), SW, vol.III, p.42. The Party rectification articles at the beginning of vol.III are Mao’s most developed criticism of dogmatism.

ibid.

See Stuart Schram, op.cit., pp.63-64.

In 1927 Mao was so convinced of imminent peasant revolution and the incorrectness of Party policy that he was on the verge of insubordination. Had Mao and the CCP gone separate ways, he would have had to deal with rural revolution within a different orienting ideology. After 1927 – probably because of the failure of his predictions in the Hunan Report, Mao remained orthodox and relatively obedient even when he considered the leadership in error. See Womack, *Foundations of Mao Zedong’s Political Thought.*