

Some Lessons of the Cultural Revolution

by David Joseph*

During the ten years after Mao the leadership in China has almost undone all the positive gains of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution carried out by the socialist roaders within the CPC, under the leadership of Mao Tsetung. Indeed, the process of capitalist restoration in China during this period has been significantly speedier than the same process in the Soviet Union. No doubt this experience is a serious setback to the international communist movement, especially at a time when it is engaged in a protracted struggle against imperialism and reaction.

But the positive lessons of the Chinese Revolution in general and the GPCR in particular stand high, above the failures and setbacks, and continue to illuminate the path of world revolution. These experiences provide answers to many of the questions raised during this era; at

the same time they raise many new questions too, because the course of history itself brings up many new complexities and situations which could not be foreseen.

During the era of imperialism and proletarian revolution which was ushered in by the October Revolution of 1917, two most important aspects of world revolution came to the fore. First, the worldwide anti-imperialist struggle in the various types of colonies, to be carried forward as part and parcel of the world proletarian revolution; and second, carrying forward the socialist revolution itself along the correct path. Starting with the Leninist teachings on both these questions, Mao Tsetung developed the Marxist-Leninist theory and practice to a higher level on both these fronts. By completing the anti-imperialist, anti-feudal phase of the Chinese revolution, establishing the people's democratic state and developing the theory of New Democratic Revolution, Mao set the model for completing this phase of revolution throughout the world.

Later, faced with the possibility of capitalist restoration during the process of socialist revolution, as happened in the USSR, Mao developed the theory and practice of class struggle under the dictatorship of the proletariat. He unleashed an unprecedented form of revolution in China, the lessons of which have not yet been properly assimilated even within the international communist movement, though the historic significance of this has already been recognised by the advanced elements all over the world.

What is attempted here is only a brief evaluation of some of the important theoretical questions raised during the preparation for the Cultural Revolution and some other new questions which have emerged in relation to these.

Preparation for building the theoretical background for the GPCR was able to commence only after the necessity of a decisive break with the theory of productive forces was recognised. The overall philosophical basis for such a break had already been provided by the

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philosophical works of Mao. In one of his important early works, "On Contradiction," he wrote: "...True, the productive forces, practice and the economic base generally play the principal and decisive role; whoever denies this is not a materialist. But it must also be admitted that in certain conditions such aspects as the relations of production, theory and the superstructure in turn manifest themselves in the principal and decisive role. When it is impossible for the productive forces to develop without a change in the relations of production, then the change in the relations of production plays the principal and decisive role.... When the superstructure (politics, culture, etc.) obstructs the development of the economic base, political and cultural changes become principal and decisive." But this is only a generalisation; the crucial question is to determine the given conditions when this change of place of opposites takes place. And it is specifically in relation to this question that crucial struggles have emerged within the communist

movement.

There had been, and still have been, repeated attempts within the international communist movement to confuse the positions of classical Marxism with the theory of productive forces. It started systematically with the theoreticians of the Second International. Lenin dealt decisive blows against this perception by developing the theory of imperialism and proletarian revolution. The myth that the proletarian revolution can take place only where the productive forces are the most developed, even under imperialism, was blown to pieces with the success of the October Revolution. But the philosophical basis of the view that the productive forces always play the determining role in the development of society was not shattered, as Lenin's contributions to philosophy in this regard, manifested in his "Philosophical Notebooks", did not become generally known. Moreover, during the period under Stalin, the theory of productive forces grew stronger as it became the basis of the official policy for

socialist construction. The Soviet party under Stalin even came to the conclusion that in Soviet society class struggle between antagonistic classes had ceased to exist. This was reflected in Stalin's statement in 1936, "...Thus all the exploiting classes have now been eliminated." This meant that the changes required in the production relations for socialist construction had already been accomplished and that what was needed now was only the development of the productive forces. So the task of consciously developing the class struggle under the dictatorship of the proletariat was given up, allowing the bureaucratic capitalist class to strengthen itself in Soviet society. Even though Stalin tried to rectify this mistake, at least partially, in the last stages of his life, it did not have any effect as the new bourgeois class had already taken over the real control of affairs in Soviet society.

Though Mao had put forward a philosophical position against the point of view adopted by Stalin, it was not considered a direct challenge

to the Soviet party and so no ideological struggle developed on this question within the international communist movement. There is no proof so far to show that Mao had noticed this basic deviation in the position of the Soviet party. It was only after 1956, when the CPC's Eighth Party Congress also adopted — unchallenged — the same basic position as that of the CPSU in 1936 that Mao started to struggle against this reactionary position. Certainly this development was related to the struggle against Khrushchevite revisionism which openly came out in 1956 at the time of the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU. Since the beginning of 1957, Mao started a consistent struggle against the theory of productive forces and during the course of that struggle developed the theory and practice of class struggle under the dictatorship of the proletariat. The ideological and political struggle culminating in the GPCR developed in and outside the CPC, mainly on the basis of the solid foundation laid down by Mao.

It is true that all aspects of the theoretical problems related to the theory of the productive forces were not discussed in a thoroughgoing manner even in the Cultural Revolution. But even since the late 1950s Mao's efforts in this direction are very evident in works like *A Critique of Soviet Economics*. The most important theoretical position cited against the theory of productive forces was Marx's unequivocal emphasis on the revolutionary changes in all the aspects of social relations during the period of social revolution. Marx said, "This socialism is the *declaration of the permanence of the revolution, the class dictatorship of the proletariat as the necessary transit point to the abolition of class distinctions generally, to the abolition of all the relations of production on which they rest, to the abolition of all the social relations that correspond to these relations of production, to the revolutionising of all the ideas that result from these social relations.*" So during the period of socialism, which is the transition period from capitalism to communism, the process of changing every aspect of capitalist relations into communist relations is the cen-

tral task.

As Mao has already pointed out in his *A Critique of Soviet Economics*, the change in the ownership of the means of production is only one aspect of the change in the production relations. The relationship among the producers, especially between the managing cadre and the producers, as well as the entire distribution system, are aspects of production relations which have to undergo basic changes. Even though these aspects of production relations belong to the economic base, the changes in these arenas is possible mainly through constant ideological struggle, especially in changing the relationships among the producers. So the ideological struggle in the superstructure gets very interlinked with the changes in the economic base, thus making any artificial separation between base and superstructure difficult.

The theory and practice of revolution in the superstructure are of greater significance as they encompass the task of changing all aspects of the existing ideological system as a whole. The struggle in the superstructure means, all the more so, struggle at the political level for ideological hegemony between the contending classes, between bourgeois ideology and the proletarian ideology. The revolution in the superstructure is not at all limited to politics, which is definitely the determining aspect, but also extends to various aspects of the whole cultural life of society. It has been proved again and again that the lingering influence of the decadent culture of the previous phase can easily assert itself as an obstacle for changing social relations. This recognition of the revolution in the superstructure as playing the determining role during the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat is certainly a departure from the previous understanding, which considered the changes in the superstructure only as supplementary to changes in the economic base. That is why the theory and practice of revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat really advances Marxism-Leninism to a new height.

Another important question that

came to the forefront in the ideological struggle during the GPCR was related to the basic understanding of the nature of political power itself. The restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union showed in an unambiguous way that the capitalist class can recapture political power from the hands of the proletariat without forcing a violent counter-revolution, that is, through a peaceful process. This phenomenon cannot be explained simply on the basis of the accepted understanding of the seizure of political power by one class from another. In order to unravel this process we will have to go deeply into the nature of the political power held by the proletariat and the process of establishing its power under the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The basic contradiction in capitalist society which is resolved through the proletarian revolution is that between socialised production and capitalist appropriation. This contradiction can be resolved only through the establishment of wholly social production. And this can be affected by the seizure of power by the proletariat and thus socialising the production relations in society as a whole. While this thesis remains the cornerstone of the whole political strategy of the communist movement, the experience so far gained has proved how complex this process of the socialisation of the production relations really is. We have seen in practice, at the time of the October Revolution, how the All-Russia Conference of the Soviets made all the major sectors of the means of production public property through issuing a decree. But this was only a juridical declaration. The real socialisation of the means of production and production relations will take place only when the people can really exercise their power in a concrete manner over the whole process of production. How this real socialisation can be translated into reality is a question that is still not properly solved.

Converting all the means of production into public property does not in itself solve the problem of socialisation of the production relations. On the contrary, it creates production relations of a new sort.

The whole lot of the means of production gets concentrated into a single unit and the overall control over the means of production gets concentrated into the hands of the decision-making bodies at the top echelons of the hierarchy of political power. This centralisation of political power gets all the more concentrated with the consolidation of the means of production into a single unit objectively. Democratic centralism at the political level alone is not going to solve this problem of over-centralisation of the means of production which has already become an objective reality. Subjective wishes and intentions of the leadership alone cannot resolve this problem if its line does not provide a concrete answer to this over-centralisation of the means of production. This situation was well illustrated during the period of socialist construction in the Soviet Union under the leadership of Stalin.

The juridical socialisation socialises the relations of production only at an abstract level. It definitely prohibits the type of private ownership over the means of production that exists in a typical capitalist society. But it does not automatically lead to the socialisation of the means of production. The over-centralisation that really takes place negates the prospects of a real socialisation. Real socialisation can take place only at a concrete level: that is, at a social level where the people can exercise their political power objectively. When such real socialisation is ensured at this appropriate social level, overall socialisation can materialise at a broader level.

But what happens in a juridically socialised society is only the objective centralisation of political power as a result of the objective concentration of the means of production. It is this objective power at the political level that gives room for the development of social-fascist power within the juridically socialised societies. In order to counter this type of development, what is required is a common line and strategy which will help the process of real socialisation of production. Here centralism means providing an

overall political line and supervising its implementation, while democracy creates the basis for the real socialisation at the appropriate concrete social level.

Mao's attempt to tackle this question has already given us unprecedented experience as reflected during the Cultural Revolution. He tried to handle even the minute questions related to changes in the production relations, like the relationship between managerial cadre and the workers in the factories, communes, etc., and showed how the basis for capitalist restoration is being created at these levels. The most important aspect of Mao's strategy for preventing capitalist restoration was to make the people at all levels capable of wielding political power with their own hands, by taking class struggle as the key link and putting politics in command. And this struggle, class struggle under the dictatorship of the proletariat, had to be waged by the people at all levels, especially at the basic level of factories, communes, etc., in order to prevent the emergence of the new bourgeoisie at these levels.

As Mao had repeatedly warned, all these attempts failed in preventing capitalist restoration in China. Indeed, it was a life-and-death struggle between the new bourgeoisie and the proletariat, in which the bourgeoisie won, though only temporarily. Of course we must further study and analyse deeply the whole history of this struggle that took place in China in order to find out the reasons for such an early defeat of the socialist roaders — a task not within the scope of this article. Even so we must still realise that the lessons of the Cultural Revolution are the most advanced in dealing with the class struggle under the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the only basis for further advance in this direction.

Mao's struggle against the theory of productive forces has far-reaching implications on another level too. The blind development of the productive forces is really threatening the very existence of the human race and our globe itself. In this situation, to achieve overall control over the development of the means of production and

technology in the interest of the future of human society is very crucial. The theoretical basis provided by the Cultural Revolution again throws light onto this problem. It is the socialised relations of production that are going to determine the future of humanity. The development of science and technology has to be brought under the purview of such socialised production relations. This means an alternate path of development of human society. Mao's search in this direction is very significant. His attempt to resolve the contradiction between town and country, between mental and manual labour, and the method of walking on two legs, etc., were all envisaging such a new approach to this question. Mao's communes as the self-reliant and self-sufficient socio-economic units of the future communist society encompass all elements of this basic approach. We are bound to develop these themes which Mao had already initiated, if we are to carry forward the tasks of the world revolution. □