

Mao's Conception of the Revolutionary Subject: A Socio-historical Approach

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Abstract

The article explores Mao's conception of the revolutionary subject, focusing on the relationship between the peasantry and proletariat. In the years after the October Revolution, when vulgar and reductionist readings and interpretations of Marx seemed to prevail, Mao, influenced by the specific material conditions and class relations in China, conceptualised an important novelty within the Marxist tradition. Namely, he developed a very different and original understanding of the revolutionary subject, and especially a different understanding of the relationship between the proletariat and peasantry. He introduced the split between the main revolutionary subject—the proletariat—and the main revolutionary force—the peasantry. This novelty, which was unique up to that point in Marxist theory, enabled Mao to think of the Chinese revolutionary movement within a Marxist framework while considering the material conditions of life in China.

Keywords: Mao, revolutionary subject, proletariat, peasantry, class consciousness

Maotova koncepcija revolucionarnega subjekta: socialno-zgodovinski pristop

Izvleček

Članek raziskuje Maotovo teorijo revolucionarnega subjekta, in sicer se osredotoča na odnos med kmeti in proletariatom. V letih po oktobrski revoluciji, ko se je zdelo, da sta prevladala vulgarno in redukcionistično branje in interpretacija Marxa, je Mao zaradi specifičnih materialnih pogojev in razrednih odnosov na Kitajskem konceptualiziral pomembno novost v marksistični tradiciji. Razvil je namreč drugačno in izvirno razumevanje revolucionarnega subjekta, predvsem pa drugačno razumevanje odnosa med proletariatom in kmeti. Uvedel je delitev med glavnim revolucionarnim subjektom – proletariatom – in ključno revolucionarno silo – kmeti, kar je bilo v marksistični teoriji nekaj edinstvenega. Ta inovacija je Maotu omogočila, da misli kitajsko revolucionarno gibanje znotraj marksističnega okvira, upoštevajoč materialne življenjske pogoje na Kitajskem.

Gljučne besede: Mao, revolucionarni subjekt, proletariat, kmeti, razredna zavest

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Introduction

The question of the revolutionary subject has always been a central concern of revolutionary theory and politics. Without the subject of the revolution, no revolutionary change is conceivable. This problem was well understood by Marx, who focused on the revolutionary potential of one emerging class in 19th-century Europe—the industrial proletariat. According to Marx, the proletariat is the product and negation of capitalist private property, the bourgeois-capitalist order and class society as such: “What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable” (Marx and Engels 2008, 51). In his reflections on the Paris Commune, Marx also mentioned the role of “the *prolétariat foncier*” (the rural proletariat) (Marx 2009, 44), but strongly doubted that the peasantry as a class could represent itself and thus play an important role in revolutionary and emancipatory processes (cf. Marx 1960).

Following Marx, Lenin and Gramsci devoted significant attention to the question of the revolutionary subject and the question of class alliances between the proletariat and peasantry. For both, it was clear that the proletariat was not big enough to sustain a revolution on its own, and that the revolution would not be legitimate if it did not have the support of the vast peasant masses. Referring to the revolution in Russia, Lenin wrote, “Is it not clear that without the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry there is not a shadow of hope for the success of this struggle?” (Lenin 1962, 298). Gramsci, influenced by the Italian context, also wrote about the necessity of a class alliance between the proletariat and the peasantry, especially when dealing with the “Southern question”:

The proletariat can become the leading (*dirigente*) and the dominant class to the extent that it succeeds in creating a system of class alliances which allows it to mobilize the majority of the working population against capitalism and the bourgeois State (Gramsci 1978, 443).

However, both Lenin and Gramsci still emphasised, theoretically and politically, that the proletariat was the crucial revolutionary subject and the main force of the revolutionary movement, although the political reality of the Bolshevik revolution was certainly at variance with this (cf. Wolfe 1969).

Within these debates about the revolutionary subject in general, and the revolutionary potential of the peasantry in particular, Mao managed to surpass the previously noted conceptions and develop a distinct theory, which can be best understood within the dialectical relationship of the classical tradition of Marxism and the specific material conditions of the first half of 20th-century

China. He developed a theory that, for the first time in the Marxist tradition, ascribed the role of the main revolutionary force to the peasantry, while still maintaining that the proletariat was the leader of the revolutionary process. With this innovation, Mao developed a new and more complex theory of the revolutionary subject. The aim of this paper is thus threefold. First, it explains Mao's reflections on the question of the revolutionary subject up to 1949, demonstrating that Mao considered multiple potential revolutionary subjects and not just one (the proletariat or peasantry). Second, it explains the peculiar separation of the main revolutionary subject (proletariat) and the main revolutionary force (peasantry). Third, it provides a socio-historical and materialist explanation for both why and how Mao developed such a distinct conception of the revolutionary subject.

In order to explain Mao's theoretical and practical innovations properly, while avoiding the trap of reducing his theory and practice to voluntarism, we proceed, after the introduction and clarification of the methodological approach, with an explanation of the social, political and economic context of the beginning of the 20th century in China. This section is followed by an in-depth analysis of various writings and speeches by Mao up to 1949, focusing on the question of the revolutionary subject and the relationship between the main revolutionary subject and the main revolutionary force. The third section focuses on explaining and contextualising why and how Mao developed a very different theory of the revolutionary subject. The concluding section highlights the implications of Mao's innovation for the Marxist tradition and of the specificity of his theoretical and political practice.

Note on Method

Before we begin with the analysis of Mao's political theory, it is important to clarify the methodological approach used in this paper. This research is based on the "socio-historical approach" to explaining political thought developed by Neil Wood (1978) and Ellen Meiksins Wood (2008). There are two important points to emphasise about this approach. First, it puts strong emphasis on the context—as without contextualisation, one cannot properly understand political thinkers. The Cambridge School had already introduced the understanding of context into

1 The year 1949 is not chosen arbitrarily. The Chinese Communists came to power in 1949, and it was logical, after this event, for Mao to pursue a different strategy and different theoretical and political practices. However, this does not imply that there was some kind of epistemological break or rupture in Mao's political theory, though specific changes can certainly be seen after 1949.

the exploration and explanation of political theory, but—and this is the second important point—within the socio-historical approach there is a different understanding of context. For the Cambridge School, the context comprises various discourses, different textual materials and “*hoch politik*,” which provide the basis for understanding a specific political theory. In the socio-historical approach, by contrast, the focus expands to cover the material conditions of life, property and class relations, in addition to the textual materials. Wood (1978, 348) argues that it is important to have a clear picture of

the polity and the economy as aspects of the society in which the theorist is living and writing. Then we must determine the nature of the existing social structure, of class divisions, of the prevailing system of status, the connection between class and status, and their relationship to the state.

Therefore, Mao's theory of the revolutionary subject, in particular the separation of the main revolutionary subject and the main revolutionary force, will be explained while focusing on the specific class and property relations in China at the beginning of the 20th century, and considering the various political, social and economic events and processes in this context, as well as the influence of the Marxist tradition.

Explaining the Context

Before proceeding with an in-depth textual analysis of Mao's thought, it is important to sketch the Chinese context, focusing on the specific class and property relations and the specific political events in China at the turn of the century. This contextualisation will help us to explain why and how Mao introduced his conceptual and practical novelties into the Marxist tradition.

First, although China has never been colonised, various imperialist and colonialist aspirations on the part of the Great Powers had a very important impact on an entire generation of Chinese political thinkers and politicians. The First Opium War (1839–1842) began China's long “Century of Humiliation” (Wright 2011, 99), which lasted until 1949 and the victory of the Chinese Communists. The subsequent wars—the Second Opium War (1856–1860) and the Chinese war against France (1884–1885)—as well as the constant confrontations with Japan and its imperial pretensions, which became very clear in 1895 and the first Sino-Japanese War, show that China had become a “playground” of the Great Powers and their interests. After the First World War, China, already a republic, lost certain territories despite being on the side of the victors. This led to demonstrations, which erupted on 4th May 1919, when the Allies at the peace conference in Versailles

gave the territories, formerly occupied by Germany, to Japan. Japan's expansionist politics and occupation of Northern China and Manchuria from the early 1930s onwards only continued to strengthen nationalist and anti-imperialist sentiments, leading to the creation of the national liberation movement, which, crucially, coincided with the protracted Chinese revolutionary war.²

Second, the strong tradition of peasant rebellions throughout Chinese history, and especially the Taiping Rebellion, should not be overlooked when explaining Mao's emphasis on the peasantry as a potential revolutionary subject and the main revolutionary force. The Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864), which erupted in the Canton area in the decade that followed the Opium War, was based on Christian teachings and on the belief that the Taiping leader, Hong Xiuquan, was chosen to establish "his Heavenly Kingdom on earth" (Reilly 2004, 3). More importantly, because of its "commune-like structure and primitive form of economic communism" (Shoppa 2000, 25) the Chinese Communists saw the Taiping Rebellion as an important historic event. As Wolf put it, the Taiping Rebellion, together with the Rebellion of Nien, "proved to be rehearsals of a still greater event, the peasant-based Communist revolution of the twentieth century" (Wolf 1969, 118–19).³

Third, the turn of the century brought new unrest and problems for the *Qing* dynasty, which in 1911/1912 resulted in its downfall. In October 1911, a mutiny broke out in the city of Wuchang that spread very quickly, leading to the abdication of the last Chinese emperor at the beginning of 1912. Sun Yat-sen, the leader of the revolutionary movement, became the first president of the Republic. However, he was quickly forced to resign and Yuan Shikai became the new president, after which he "nipped China's fledgling democracy in the bud" (Mitter 2013, 35) and destabilised the republican government. After Yuan's death, the vast territories of rural and urban China were ruled for the next 10 years mostly by warlords, who took over political, social and economic control at the local and regional levels. Mao's experience of fighting the warlords, in different periods and jointly with the nationalist Guomindang, had an immense impact on the development of his thought, especially in relation to the peasant question and peasant guerrilla warfare.⁴

Fourth, one cannot ignore the febrile relationship between the Communists and the nationalists. The agent of Comintern for China, Borodin, met with Sun

2 For more on these topics, see Chesneaux, Bastic and Bergère (1977), Osterhammel (1999), Lowell (2011), Mitter (2013), and Saje (2015, 403–30).

3 For more on the Taiping Rebellion, see also Wolf (1969), Chin (2000), Reilly (2004) and Platt (2012).

4 For more on the topic of the downfall of the empire and the warlord era, see Wakeman (1975), Mitter (2004), Saje (2004) and Saje (2015).

Yat-sen in the spring of 1921, and was very impressed by his revolutionary enthusiasm, and thus believed that the Guomindang should lead the revolution in China, and that the Communists should join the Guomindang party (Saje 2015, 453–54). After the Communist Party of China (CPC) was formally established in July 1921 in Shanghai, negotiations began with the Guomindang about forming a coalition to fight the warlords and establish a centralised government under the leadership of the Guomindang. The pact was formed in 1922 and lasted until 1927; during the first phase of the Northern Expedition (July 1926–June 1928), a radical split occurred between the Communists and Guomindang, and within the Guomindang itself. After the siege of Shanghai, Chiang Kai-shek, leader of the nationalists ordered the mass slaughter of Communists. This marked the end of the so-called First United Front in China and the Communists were, for the next few years, mostly isolated in the countryside.⁵

Fifth, one should also mention the strange relationship between the CPC and the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was from the beginning very supportive of the Guomindang. Certainly, there were many arguments and conflicts between Chiang Kai-shek and the Soviet Union, but even after the Second World War the Soviet Union supported the Guomindang more than it did the CPC:

Stalin, before the Soviet occupation of Manchuria, did not believe that the Chinese Communists could take power, and recommended to Mao Zedong to cooperate with Chiang Kai-shek. The agreement between Stalin and Chiang Kai-shek was, of course, a great disappointment for the Chinese Communists. (Saje 2015, 479)

Only when the military strength of the Chinese Communists became apparent did Stalin change his attitude towards them. Moreover, despite these disagreements, the CPC really had no other allies but the Soviet Union.⁶ This fact can help us understand and explain why Mao insisted that the proletariat and Party had to have a decisive role in the protracted revolutionary war in China, while also recognising that the peasantry was the main revolutionary force and that the Revolution was actually a peasant movement.

Sixth, Mao's insistence that the proletariat is the crucial revolutionary subject and the leader of the revolutionary process, because it is the most class-conscious class, cannot be understood apart from the influence of the Marxist tradition.

5 For more on the topic, see Kwai (1970), Mitter (2004) and Saje (2015).

6 For more on Sino-Soviet relations and the relationship between the Chinese and Soviet Communists see Saje (2004) and Saje (2015).

We have already explained in the introduction that this was, until Mao at least, the classical Marxist line of argumentation. However, because of specific class and property relations that existed in China, Mao altered certain things in his conception of the revolutionary process and revolutionary subject in order to be able to consider the revolution in a predominantly agrarian land.⁷

Seventh, we also have to consider the specific class structure and class composition of Chinese society at the beginning of the 20th century, in which at least 80 percent of the population were peasants.⁸ Certainly, many differences existed among the peasantry:

Countrywide, approximately 40 percent of the farmland was rented out by landlords. About 30 percent of farm families were pure tenants, and another 20 percent rented part of their land, leaving 50 percent as owners of plots of widely varying sizes. (Skocpol 1980, 68)⁹

However, Mao used the numerical size of a class as one of the most important criteria “when assessing the revolutionary potential of different social classes” (Meisner 1982, 58; see also Schram 1989, 39). The specific class structure of Chinese society proved to be crucial, since the Chinese revolution was a peasant one: “... obviously, no revolution in a more than 90 percent agrarian country could succeed without peasant participation, and [Chinese Communist Party] leaders had always known that” (Mann 2012, 399).

Therefore, the above-mentioned points have, at least, to be taken into account when engaging in a socio-historical and materialist explanation of Mao’s theoretical and political practice to avoid reducing it to voluntarism.

Mao and the Revolutionary Subject

In order to explain Mao’s theoretical and practical innovations on the topic of the revolutionary subject, it is necessary to analyse his various writings, speeches and letters. Therefore, this section first explains the relationship between the

7 Li Dazhao, one of the founders of the CPC, also ascribed an important role to the peasantry in the Chinese Revolution. Li and his theory had a great influence on Mao (see Meisner 1982, 33; Saje 2015, 454).

8 Cf. Feuerwerker (1969, 15), Skocpol (1980, 68) and Mann (2012, 398–399). Mao also emphasised that the peasants and workers comprised more than 80 percent of the Chinese population (Mao 1975a, 168).

9 However, as Skocpol (1980, 68) points out, Chinese agriculture at the turn of the century should not be seen as feudal, since “there were no seigneurs with juridical rights to dues or to serf labor as in precapitalist Europe. Nor did Chinese agriculture feature large, owner-cultivated estates.”

revolutionary subject(s) and the main revolutionary force. Then, the topic of class consciousness and its role in conceptualising the difference between the main revolutionary subject and the main revolutionary force are introduced into the debate.

The Revolutionary Subject(s) and the Main Revolutionary Force

In the early 1920s, while working as a working class organiser and forming trade unions in the cities, Mao did not pay close attention to and did not write about the question of revolutionary subjects and the main revolutionary force. After 1925–1926, when he moved to the rural areas of Hunan province, he discovered the revolutionary potential of the peasantry, which is best seen in his *Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan*. In this *Report*, Mao emphasised the role of the peasantry in the upcoming revolution, as follows:

The poor peasants have always been the main force in the bitter fight in the countryside. They have fought militantly through the two periods of underground work and of open activity. They are the most responsive to Communist Party leadership. (Mao 1975b, 32)

Given the title of this text, it is logical that the working class is barely mentioned in the entire *Report*. Hence, at this stage, one could perhaps conclude that Mao was focusing only on the peasants as the revolutionary subject and main revolutionary force. However, this would be wrong, because, as Schram has argued, the “Hunan peasant report of February 1927 attributed to the poor peasants the leading role in the struggle in the countryside; [but] it did not downgrade the importance of the cities, and of the classes based in the cities” (Schram 1989, 41).

In May 1927, Mao gave a speech to welcome delegates to the Pacific Labour Conference, in which he clarified his idea:

The Chinese peasant movement is the main force in the revolutionary process ... They [the peasants] should especially go hand in hand with the working class of the whole and rely deeply on the influence and guidance of the worker's movement. (Mao in Knight 2007, 79)

Thus, the class alliance between the peasantry and working class is seen as indispensable to the Chinese Revolution. Even more importantly, we already see here the split between the main revolutionary subject and main revolutionary force. At the beginning of 1930, Mao again made explicit this dual perspective of the revolutionary subject and the main revolutionary force:

It would be wrong to abandon the struggle in the cities, but in our opinion it would also be wrong for any of our Party members to fear the growth of peasant strength.... For in the revolution in semi-colonial China, the peasant struggle must always fail if it does not have the leadership of the workers, but the revolution is never harmed if the peasant struggle outstrips the forces of the workers. (Mao 1975c, 123)

In December 1936, Mao made another explicit reference to the question of the revolutionary subject and the revolutionary force: “The masses of China’s peasantry and urban petty bourgeoisie wish to take an active part in the revolutionary war and to carry it to complete victory. They are the main forces in the revolutionary war ...” (Mao 1975d, 191–92).

We see here that, somewhat curiously, Mao also included the urban petty bourgeoisie in the list of potential revolutionary subjects. Then, in May 1937, Mao again named the bourgeoisie as a potential revolutionary subject, stating that the new state will be “based on the alliance of the working class, the peasantry, the petty bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie” (Mao 1975e, 275). It was logical for him to include certain layers of the bourgeoisie in the list of potential revolutionary subjects, since from the mid-1930s onwards, Mao believed that the upcoming revolution would be a bourgeois-democratic one. Thus it was that he wrote in 1937: “What we ask is: carry out firm revolutionary policies and strive for complete victory in the bourgeois-democratic revolution” (ibid.). It is not surprising, then, that Mao stated that the new state “will be a bourgeois-democratic state socially and economically” (ibid.).

In 1939 he then stressed that the “motive forces of the revolution are the proletariat, the peasantry and all members of other classes who are willing to oppose imperialism and feudalism” (Mao 1975f, 242; see also Mao 1975g). He expressed something very similar in *The Orientation of the Youth Movement*:

What kind of revolution are we making today? Today we are making a bourgeois-democratic revolution, and nothing we do goes beyond its scope. By and large, we should not destroy the bourgeois system of private property for the present; what we want to destroy is imperialism and feudalism. (Mao 1975f, 242)

It is thus clear why Mao insisted that the

proletariat, the peasantry and the other sections of the petty bourgeoisie ... cannot be ignored, either in the alignment of forces for the struggle (that is, in the united front) or in the organization of state power ... The Chinese

revolution at the present stage must strive to create a democratic republic in which the workers, the peasants and the other sections of the petty bourgeoisie all occupy a definite position and play a definite role. (Mao 1975g, 328–29)

However, even while writing about a bourgeois-democratic revolution Mao still considered the peasantry and working class to be the “backbone of the revolution,” since they formed “90 percent of the country’s population” (Mao 1975f, 242). Moreover, despite these formulations, Mao actually considered the peasantry to be “the main force in the revolution,” which is “led by the Communist Party, the party of the proletariat” (Mao 1975g, 317). Consequently, it is not surprising that in 1940 Mao argued, that “the Chinese Revolution is essentially a peasant revolution and that the resistance to Japan now going on is essentially peasant resistance” (Mao 1975i, 366). For him, it was obvious that the “armed struggle in China is, in essence, peasant war ...” (Mao 1975h, 287).

In April 1945, Mao mentioned four potential revolutionary subjects—the proletariat, the peasantry, the urban bourgeoisie and the national bourgeoisie—referring to the peasantry as the “the main political force for democracy in China at the present stage” (Mao 1967a, 250).¹⁰ However, he emphasised that one should not ignore “the working class, which is politically the most conscious and therefore qualified to lead the whole revolutionary movement. Let there be no misunderstanding” (ibid.). In 1949, Mao again named the peasants, workers and urban petty bourgeoisie, considering them to be the potential revolutionary subjects of the Chinese revolution:

The people’s democratic dictatorship is based on the alliance of the working class, the peasantry and the urban petty bourgeoisie, and mainly on the alliance of the workers and the peasants, because these two classes comprise 80 to 90 percent of China’s population (Mao 1975j, 421).

Let us thus summarise, without detailed explanation, the three clear points outlined above. First, contrary to some interpretations, Mao, and certainly from the mid-1930s onwards, considered at least three potential revolutionary subjects:

10 When speaking of the most important goals of the bourgeois-democratic revolution, Mao explained that the “target of this revolution is not the bourgeoisie in general but national and feudal oppression ... the measures taken in this revolution are in general directed not at abolishing but at protecting private property ...” (Mao 1967a, 247).

the proletariat, the peasantry¹¹ and the different layers of the bourgeoisie (national, urban and petty). This was logical because Mao considered the upcoming revolution to be only a bourgeois-democratic one. Second, it is clear that Mao saw the class alliance between the proletariat and the peasantry to be crucial for the revolution. Third, although the class alliance was considered crucial, Mao still emphasised, in the broader context of the bourgeois-democratic revolution, that the peasants were potentially the main revolutionary force and the proletariat the leader of the revolution. However, this still does not show us the complexity of Mao's reflections on the question of the revolutionary subject, and specifically on the separation of the main revolutionary subject and the main revolutionary force, since there is another crucial topic to consider—that of class consciousness.

Class Consciousness as the Crucial Element in Mao's Theory of the Revolutionary Subject

The question of class consciousness is crucial to the Marxist tradition. In some of Marx's writings we can find a differentiation between the class in itself and class for itself (see Marx 1955). The topic was later developed by, among others, Lenin (1961, 347–530), Gramsci (1977) and most notably György Lukács (1968).¹² However, because of the different social, political and economic contexts and different strategical views, the topic of class consciousness in Mao's political

11 It is crucial that we must also ask which peasants Mao considered to be a potentially revolutionary subject and the main revolutionary force. If we draw on his *Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society* (ibid. 1975k, 13–21), we can say for certain that he included in this broad spectrum the owner-peasants, which he categorised under the broader class of the petty bourgeoisie; the semi-owner peasants and poor peasants, whom he considered to be part of the semi-proletariat; and the peasants without land, whom he considered to be part of the lumpen-proletariat and who could be considered “brave fighters but apt to be destructive.” However, he also felt that they could become a revolutionary force “if given proper guidance” (ibid. 1975k, 19).

12 Mao demonstrated this theoretical knowledge of the topic in 1937, in the text *On Practice*, where he explicitly made the distinction between the class in itself and class for itself, a Hegelian-Marxist distinction: “In its knowledge of capitalist society, the proletariat was only in the perceptual stage of cognition in the first period of its practice, the period of machine-smashing and spontaneous struggle; it knew only some of the aspects and the external relations of the phenomena of capitalism. The proletariat was then still a ‘class-in-itself.’ But when it reached the second period of its practice, the period of conscious and organised economic and political struggles, the proletariat was able to comprehend the essence of capitalist society, the relations of exploitation between social classes and its own historical task; and it was able to do so because of its own practice and because of its experience of prolonged struggle, which Marx and Engels scientifically summed up in all its variety to create the theory of Marxism for the education of the proletariat. It was then that the proletariat became a ‘class-for-itself.’” (Mao 1975l, 301) Thus, the entire topic of class consciousness, education and cultural/ideological change has to be considered through the lens of this distinction.

theory has a different role, and is the basis for the separation between the main revolutionary subject from the main revolutionary force.

In the *Hunan Report*, Mao had already indicated the role of the Party and the proletariat in relation to the peasantry:

The Communist Party's propaganda policy in such matters should be, "Draw the bow without shooting, just indicate the motions." It is for the peasants themselves to cast aside the idols, pull down the temples to the martyred virgins and the arches to the chaste and faithful widows; it is wrong for anybody else to do it for them. (Mao 1975b, 46)

Thus, the Party should lead and direct the peasant struggle.

The importance of class consciousness appeared in Mao's work explicitly in 1928, after the split with Guomindang: "After receiving political education, the Red Army soldiers have all become class-conscious and learned the essentials of distributing land, setting up political power, arming the workers and peasants, etc." (Mao 1975m, 81). In December 1929, Mao made it explicit that the question of education of the peasantry and working class was crucial for getting rid of "incorrect ideas": "The source of such incorrect ideas in this Party organisation lies, of course, in the fact that its basic units are composed largely of peasants and other elements of petty-bourgeois origin /.../" (Mao 1975n, 105). Therefore, it was crucial to educate the masses, and especially the peasantry, "so as to provide fresh mass strength for the war, and towards consolidating the worker-peasant alliance and the democratic dictatorship of workers and peasants and strengthening proletarian leadership by building up the economy" (Mao 1975o, 129).

In 1936 Mao made it explicit that the proletariat and Party should have the leading role in revolutionary warfare, since they were the most class conscious. Therefore the role of educating the peasantry, which was seen as potentially the main revolutionary force, was indispensable:

Of all the social strata and political groupings in semi-colonial China, the proletariat and the Communist Party are the ones most free from narrow-mindedness and selfishness, are politically the most far-sighted, the best organized and the readiest to learn with an open mind from the experience of the vanguard class, the proletariat, and its political party throughout the world and to make use of this experience in their own cause. Hence only the proletariat and the Communist Party can lead the peasantry, the urban petty bourgeoisie and bourgeoisie, can overcome the narrow-mindedness of the peasantry and the petty bourgeoisie, the destructiveness of the unemployed masses, and also (provided the

Communist Party does not err in its policy) the vacillation and lack of thoroughness of the bourgeoisie—and can lead the revolution and the war on to the road of victory. (Mao 1975d, 192)

Although, as we have seen, Mao considered that the revolution would be a bourgeois-democratic one, he was highly sceptical of peasant and bourgeois class consciousness, since these groups were

limited in their political outlook (and some of the unemployed masses have anarchist views), so that they are unable to give correct leadership in the war ... In this era, any revolutionary war will definitely end in defeat if it lacks, or runs counter to, the leadership of the proletariat and the Communist Party. (Mao 1975d, 192)

Thus, the proletariat and the Party are crucial in this context, since their role is to lead and to reshape the class consciousness of the peasantry and of the potentially revolutionary layers of the bourgeoisie.

In 1937, Mao argued again that the destiny of the revolution depended on the work of the Party in educating the peasantry and proletariat:

The change from the predominance of the bourgeoisie to that of the proletariat is a long process of struggle, of struggle for leadership in which success depends on the work of the Communist Party in raising the level of political consciousness and organization both of the proletariat and of the peasantry and urban petty bourgeoisie (Mao 1975p, 290).

Education and a rise in the level of consciousness were imperative:

To overcome the undesirable tendencies we have described, it is absolutely necessary to raise the Marxist-Leninist theoretical level of the whole Party, for Marxism-Leninism alone is the compass which can guide the Chinese Revolution to victory ... (Mao 1975e, 275).

Similarly, in 1940, Mao was writing about the importance of “educat[ing] the peasantry and other sections of the people in socialism properly and step by step” (Mao 1975i, 378). Education was seen as crucial, since, as Mao argued, the vast peasant and petty-bourgeois masses had one major shortcoming—the wrong class consciousness:

Among the proletariat many retain petty-bourgeois ideas, while both the peasants and the urban petty bourgeoisie have backward ideas; these are

burdens hampering them in their struggle. We should be patient and spend a long time in educating them ... (Mao 1967b, 71).

Mao also admitted that the peasantry and certain sections of the petty bourgeoisie formed the majority in the Party. However, this meant that the level of consciousness of the vast majority of Party was "incorrect":

The revolutionary fervour of these comrades is admirable ..., but they have brought with them into the Party ideas which are out of keeping or not altogether in keeping with Marxism.... It constitutes an extremely serious contradiction, an enormous difficulty. (ibid. 1967c, 278)

Because of this, there was a rising ideological contradiction

between the proletarian ideology and non-proletarian ideologies (including those of the petty bourgeoisie, the bourgeoisie and even of the landlord class, but mainly of the petty bourgeoisie), i.e., the contradiction between the Marxist ideology and non-Marxist ideologies, which was solved through education and that enabled the Party "to go forward with great, firm strides in unprecedented (though not complete) ideological, political and organizational unity" (ibid.).

After the end of the Second World War, Mao argued that the focus of the Party should be on

educating and consolidating the ranks of the Party and solving the contradictions between the Party and the masses by combining the efforts of Party and non-Party people according to the experience gained in Pingshan County (Mao 1975q, 193).

Without education, the hegemony of the Communist movement could not be established, as Mao wrote:

Give the middle peasants political education. If we do not do all these things, we will lose the support of the middle peasants. In the cities, the same holds true for the working class and the Communist Party in exercising their leadership of the middle bourgeoisie, democratic parties and people's organisations oppressed and injured by the reactionary forces. (Mao 1975r, 188)

Mao claimed that the “people’s democratic dictatorship” is “led by the proletariat and [is] based on the worker-peasant alliance.” However, this “democratic dictatorship” required that the CPC “conscientiously unite the entire working class, the entire peasantry and the broad masses of revolutionary intellectuals” (Mao 1975s, 372).

In 1949, Mao stated that a lack of education and class consciousness among the peasantry represented a “serious problem” for the revolutionary movement (Mao 1975j, 419). Even more importantly, in relation to the peasantry and different layers of the bourgeoisie, Mao made it clear that the proletariat was the leader of this (bourgeois-democratic) revolution, since it was the class

that is most farsighted, most selfless and most thoroughly revolutionary. The entire history of revolution proves that without the leadership of the working class revolution fails and that with the leadership of the working class revolution triumphs. (ibid., 421)

Thus, it is clear that the question of class consciousness plays a crucial role in this context, as only the class-conscious proletariat, class-conscious layers of peasantry and class-conscious layers of the bourgeoisie can be considered to be revolutionary subjects in Mao’s political theory. Here, one should add that the peasantry and certain layers of the bourgeoisie actually have to develop proletarian class consciousness. Crucially, this has fundamental implications with regard to the main revolutionary subject and main revolutionary force of the revolutionary process. It means that the main revolutionary subject, the leader of the revolutionary struggle, is the most class-conscious class—that is, the proletariat. On the other hand, only when the vast majority of the peasants have developed the class consciousness of the proletariat can they become the main revolutionary force of the Chinese Revolution.

Socio-historical Explanation of Mao’s Theory of the Revolutionary Subject

Thus far, the analysis has been based on an exegesis of Mao’s political theory. However, it is also important to explain how and why Mao came to conceptualise these novelties.

First, as we have shown, there were three different potential revolutionary subjects in Mao’s political theory up to 1949. This broad conception of the revolutionary subject has to do with the specific material conditions and class relations that existed in China at that time. That is to say, Mao conceptualised the upcoming revolution as only a bourgeois-democratic one. He did so because an important event had taken place in the early 1930s—the Japanese occupation of Manchuria

and northern China. From then on, Mao had to consider the revolutionary struggle alongside the national liberation movement. Moreover, the very specific class context and class structure of Chinese society helps to explain this conception. The peasants were the biggest class, and peasant guerrilla warfare proved to be successful against the warlords, while the proletariat was the most organised class and the bourgeoisie had the material resources that were necessary for the organised struggle against Japan. Thus, the occupation by Japan, the national liberation struggle and the specific class composition of China help to explain Mao's insistence that the revolution was not only dependent on a class alliance between the proletariat and peasantry, but also on the inclusion of certain layers of the bourgeoisie. Undoubtedly, this broad conceptualisation should also be attributed to the strategic orientation of Mao's political theory, managing to connect specific theoretical and political practices by connecting the revolutionary class struggle with the national liberation movement and the anti-imperialist sentiments of the broad masses.

Second, it is clear that Mao introduced the novelty of the separation of the main revolutionary subject and the main revolutionary force. As we have explained, Mao based this distinction on the alleged different class consciousnesses of the two classes. He considered the peasants, with a developed proletarian class consciousness, to be the main revolutionary force of the bourgeois-democratic revolution, but he also considered the class-conscious proletariat to be the main revolutionary subject and the leader of the bourgeois-democratic revolution. However, there are also other reasons for this separation, which can and have to be traced back to the specific social, political and economic context of China. First, the peasants comprised the biggest class in China—over 80 percent of the entire Chinese population. Thus, a successful revolutionary movement would have not been possible without the support of the vast peasant masses. Second, after the violent split between the Communist Party and Guomindang in 1927, the Communists were mostly driven out to the countryside. Although while he was still fighting the warlords alongside the Guomindang Mao had already theorised the peasantry as the potential revolutionary subject and the main revolutionary force, this split gave the Communists no choice but to rely on the peasantry. Third, the radical history of peasant uprisings reinforced Mao's conviction that the peasants had the capacity, if accompanied by the proper leadership of the proletariat and the Party, to become the main revolutionary force.

On the other hand, Mao stuck strictly to the traditional Marxist position that the class-conscious proletariat, as organised in the Party, was the leader of the revolutionary process. However, there is, in addition to this theoretical influence from traditional Marxism, another explanation for Mao's insistence that the proletariat had to be the

leader of the revolutionary movement, and that is the isolation of the Chinese Communists. The only support that they were getting was from the Soviet Union, which was—as noted above—more supportive of the Guomindang. However, without the support of the Soviet Union it would have been even harder to achieve victory in the revolution. Thus, this split has to be attributed to Mao's Marxist political and theoretical inclinations, and to his understanding of the class relations and political reality in China.

Thus, only by considering the specific context can we explain the distinct theory of the revolutionary subject and the separation of the main revolutionary subject and main revolutionary force in Mao's political theory. While never disregarding the specific Chinese context and by including certain Marxist concepts, Mao managed to resolve a potential contradiction in his theory of the revolutionary subject and between theory and practice in the revolutionary process.

Conclusion

Mao's conception of the revolutionary subject was one of the most important theoretical and practical innovations within Marxist theory and practice just before and after the Second World War. The transformation and adaptation of the Marxist theory of the revolutionary subject in Mao's political theory was a result of a strategic, practical and theoretical assessment of the existing political, social and economic conditions in China. The conceptualisation of the three potentially revolutionary classes, in the context of the national liberation struggle, proved to be crucial in this respect. Moreover, the specific separation of the main revolutionary subject and the main revolutionary force enabled Mao to both include and ascribe a huge importance to China's vast peasant masses. However, at no point did Mao disregard the canonical Marxist conception of the proletariat as the leader of the revolution on account of its specific class consciousness. As Schram has stated,

That Mao Tse-tung mobilized the peasants to make revolution is indisputably true; that he blindly followed the ideas of the peasants instead of leading them is patently absurd. The evidence for his commitment to the Leninist conception of the vanguard party, in theory and in practice, is overwhelming. (Schram 1989, 4)

Mao managed to connect specific Marxist theoretical insights with the concrete situation in China and to enrich the Marxist conception of the revolutionary subject. Only by considering the concrete material conditions in China, in combination with the specific Marxist theoretical background, could Mao come to regard the peasantry (the owner and semi-owner peasants, the poor peasants and

the peasants without land) with a proletarian class consciousness to be the main revolutionary force in the bourgeois-democratic revolution in China, led by the proletariat, a revolution in which certain layers of the bourgeoisie might also play an important role if and when they develop proletarian class consciousness.

Therefore, without adopting a socio-historical approach and examining Mao's embeddedness within the specific material living conditions of China in the first half of the 20th century, one cannot understand his specific theory of the revolutionary subject. Only when we consider all these elements together can we begin to grasp what Mao believed to be the true meaning of the term "Sinification of Marxism"—embedding Marxist theory and adapting it to specific living conditions in China, beyond voluntarism and determinism.

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