

# Mao's Marxist Negation of Marxism: The Limits of Revolutionary Subject's Negation of Revolutionary Theory without Affirming Itself

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## Abstract

In this paper, my main aim is to analyse Mao's conception of Marxist theory and his Marxist subjectivity in theory construction in his three articles. While doing so, I will use two main approaches, first is the idea that Karl Marx's method in understanding social relations and his theory of knowledge is in many aspects compatible and in continuation with an epistemological reading of Hegel's subjectivity, and the second is the general structure about the relationship between the object and subject's process of knowing is similar in all three thinkers. While doing so, I will advocate the position that Mao's epistemology is compatible with the Marxist understanding of Hegelian epistemology, and that from such an epistemological understanding it is possible to investigate Mao's three texts in a way that yields, not an orthodox or "end result" Marxism, but instead a more general, meta epistemological understanding of Marx, that is understood better structurally. Eventually, I will claim that while using "scientific" or "orthodox" Marxism as a method to understand society, Mao further uses the subjective element in the same way as Hegel and Marx used it, although eventually he diverts the Marxist subjective manoeuvre to another direction.

**Keywords:** Hegel, Marx, Mao, dialectics, epistemology

## Maotova marksistična negacija marksizma: omejitve negacije revolucionarne teorije s strani revolucionarnega sebstva brez samopotrjevanja

### Izvilleček:

Osnovni cilj tega članka je analiza Maotove koncepcije marksistične teorije ter njegove marksistične subjektivnosti v konstrukciji teorij treh njegovih člankov. Pri tem bom izhajal iz treh osrednjih izhodišč. Prvo je najti v ideji o tem, da sta Marxova metoda razumevanja družbenih odnosov in njegova spoznavna teorija združljivi z epistemološkim branjem Heglove subjektivnosti in predstavljata njeno nadgradnjo. Drugo izhodišče je v podobnosti splošne teorije o strukturi relacij spoznavnega procesa, ki predstavlja interakcijo med subjektom in objektom spoznanja, pri vseh treh omenjenih teoretikih. Pri tem bom potrdil pozicijo, da je Maotova epistemologija združljiva z marksističnim razumevanjem Heglove

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epistemologije. Iz vidika takšnega epistemološkega razumevanja je možno ta tri Mao-tova besedila raziskati tako, da ne vodijo do ortodoksnega marksizma oziroma njegovega »končnega rezultata«, temveč do bolj splošnega, bolj epistemološkega in strukturnega razumevanja Marxa. Na koncu članek pokaže, da je Mao sicer uporabljal »znanstveni« oziroma »ortodoksni« marksizem kot metodo razumevanja družbe, vendar je poleg tega uporabil elemente subjektivnosti na enak način, kot sta ga uporabljala tudi Hegel in Marx, četudi je konec koncev ta marksistični maneuver obrnil v popolnoma drugo smer.

**Gljučne besede:** Hegel, Marx, Mao, dialektika, epistemologija

## Introduction

Put very crudely, this paper aims to provide a perspective to understand whether the Marxism of Mao Zedong can be considered within Marxist orthodoxy or not. In many cases, the criterion for Marxist orthodoxy is seen to be fidelity to “Marxist laws” or employment of Marxist epistemology in theory construction (Knight 1983, 2005). Although there are many different understandings of Marxist orthodoxy and Mao’s Marxism, I will employ Lukács’ definition of orthodoxy, since its emphasis is on the method rather than concepts of Marxism to determine the correct interpretation of Marxism. The reason for that is, in terms of concepts or theory, it is not easy to see Mao in traditional Marxian terms, while through the interpretation of Marxism based on “Marxism as a guide to action” perspective, the criteria of Marxism are generally very loose. If we try to see Mao’s three works in totality to yield a general attempt from a Hegelian–Marxist consciousness, I believe that the evaluation of another perspective on Marxist orthodoxy is possible.

The texts I will analyse are three of Mao’s works: *Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society*, *On Practice* and *On Contradiction*. I will take *Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society* as the basis to claim Mao’s orthodoxy in theoretical terms, and therefore, his *assertion* of Marxist orthodoxy. In the second one, *On Practice*, I will argue for Mao’s epistemological Marxist orthodoxy in this text, while I will claim that he starts to become theoretically unorthodox. In this way, I will consider this to be his *negation* of Marxist theory, while still being within the boundaries of Marxism. And lastly, I will analyse *On Contradiction* as an attempt to negate the first negation Mao did in his *On Practice*, which can serve as a basis for Marxist orthodoxy on the grounds that Mao’s writings in this era are not strictly identical with traditional Marxism.

*On Practice* and *On Contradiction* are considered to be Mao’s main philosophical writings in the Yan’an period, where there was relative political and military stability, and the Chinese Communist Party was able to focus on philosophical readings and teaching. While the third one is an older work, written in 1926,

about his general perspective on Chinese society, and has a more orthodox basis and is an analysis of society based on “Marxist science.” I think it is important to read through these three works, and while *Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society* clearly expresses Mao’s understanding of the social reality and his theorization of the society, his philosophical works *On Contradiction* and *On Practice* define how he relates ideas to the social reality.

## Orthodox Marxisms; Method and Consciousness

Marxism is many things. It is a certain understanding of the world, it is a certain theory, it is a certain epistemology and it is a certain guide to action. As Dirlík (2005, 76) notes “All Marxism may be viewed as a philosophy of praxis (or practice intended to change the world), as it was Karl Marx himself who stated that the goal of philosophy was not just to interpret but to change the world....” Marx himself already declares it in his “young Marx” phase in *Theses on Feuerbach*, famously in the 11th thesis on the spring of 1845 as, “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it” (Marx, 1976, 5). Of course the discussions about the scientific status of Marxism as advocated by Althusser’s *For Marx* or the reception of Marx as a guide for revolutionary action in general, regardless of the scientific content in his writings, is also a thorny issue. I assume that, in line with Louis Althusser, in late Marx it makes sense to see a scientific form of Marxism. However, “young Marx” also holds a key to “understand and change the world,” due to his more manifest relationship between theory and practice, and the role of consciousness in theory construction. Quite naturally this is a more “Hegelian” reading of Marx, which puts a heavier emphasis on consciousness and the relationship of the consciousness with theory. Understanding a form of fidelity to the theory, while departing from certain limitations of theory, requires such a reception of Marxism. In order to formulate it, first we shall look into Hegelian epistemology.

### *Hegelian Epistemology*

Hegel’s entire philosophy was treated—rightfully—as a theory of knowledge right after his works were published. Starting from the 1980s, Hegel was started to be seen an epistemologist not only in continental philosophy, but also in analytical philosophy, marking the renewed interest in his work. This turn came about from several well-known philosophers and scholars of Hegel (Ameriks 1992). One important philosopher who investigated different aspects of *Phenomenology*,

Kenneth Westphal (1989, 2003), looks into *Phenomenology of Spirit (PS)* to extract an epistemology which can be integrated to modern currents of epistemology, through applying Hegel's work as a kind meta epistemology. On the other hand, Rockmore (1989, 1997) uses a different approach. Rockmore's aim is not to integrate Hegel's epistemology to the modern epistemological picture, but rather read through *PS* and his other works to understand the structure of it. I argue Rockmore's idea about the circular structure is an appropriate method to understand Hegel, since Hegel uses this structure repetitively in order to create his own ground for knowledge. Moreover, I believe this same structure can be found in Marx and Mao.

### Circularity, Anti-foundationalism and Subjectivity

I will employ an anti-foundationalist and circular reading of Hegel in this text, because in order to place a subjectivity out of theory, while still holding the theory as true, requires an element that perceives the theory both as true and in need of improvement at the same time. I think this understanding can enable us to see Mao's Marxism in subjectivist and orthodox terms. The alternative of creating a foundation and then trying to construct a theory based on this single foundation is quite contrary to dialectical method.

The criterion for truth, according to Hegel, is the process of knowing itself (Rockmore 1997). For Hegel's *PS* the standard for truth can exist only in another level of consciousness that the subject has to reach, because at the level of asserting a truth on that stage, there is no standard of truth. The standard emerges only within the boundaries of another level of consciousness. "Thus in what consciousness affirms from within itself as *being-in-itself* or the *True* we have the standard which consciousness itself sets up by which to measure what it knows (PS §84, 53)."

In Hegelian understanding, the subject relates itself to the object and through this relationship produces truths about the object and its own self. However, when a contradiction arises due to the subject's knowing of the object and a new knowledge of the object or the subject, the subject needs to carry itself to a greater understanding that can negate the first negation.

For with regard to a knowing that is not truthful, science cannot simply reject it as just a common view of things while giving out the assurance that it is itself a completely different kind of cognition and that that other knowing counts as absolutely nothing for science; nor can science appeal to some intimation, contained within that other knowing, of something better (PS §76, 55).

This way, Hegelian epistemology enables the subject to understand the truth of the knowledge in a knowledge structure, which cannot be held true within the limitations of the structure that it is intended to be expressed. This is the exact Hegelian example, and in fact it justifies the truth of something that is not founded, yet cannot be wrong at the same time. The example of geometry is practical here. We can understand that, for any fully developed structure, all parts are meaningfully true with respect to their relationship that occurs when the whole structure is complete. We can justify our knowledge of a triangle's angles only with the knowledge of the full structure of the triangle.

Furthermore, when the idea that the foundation itself is not the standard for truth but rather the method for asserting the foundation itself, if considered within the scope of Hegel's own works, then this applies to *Phenomenology of Spirit* even stronger, since the idea is that *PS* presents the subject within its quest for truth.

Departing from this point, it makes better sense to think about a second level of thought, that is not a circle but more of a spiral. Of course for this spiral to be in effect, there needs to be a subject that mitigates the process. It is well established by many scholars that Hegel puts heavy emphasis on subject's active role in knowing (Rockmore 1989, 1997; Westphal 1989, 2003; Žižek 2017).

Furthermore, in each and every level of knowing in *PS*, there is also a subjective element, a mediator, that is in relationship with the previous mode of knowing. Without this middle ground, which results in the higher level of knowing, there would be no place for the subject to hold the truth of the other stages of consciousness. As Quante (2013) states, Hegel in *PS* takes two stances on conceptual development, one from the standpoint of philosopher who knows the whole story, and the other being psychological, that goes through the whole process of knowing as we read. The standpoint of a philosopher who can hold the different stages of knowing as true also justifies the pragmatic conception for the reason that the subject's effort can hold different kinds of truths together without going to a contradiction. I believe this is Marx's position with respect to theory.

### *Marx's Criticism of Lack of Subjectivity*

What I will do here is try to understand Marx based on the reading of Hegel's circular epistemology and the subjective element in knowing. The distinction between Marxist science and the Hegelian understanding of knowledge with a Marxist subject will be crucial here. For this purpose, I will focus on *The German Ideology* precisely because it is a critique of a purely theoretical level of knowledge. Furthermore,

in *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels introduce a consciousness and a subjectivity which is the level from which we can see several levels of consciousness together.

### **The Active Role of Consciousness and Marxian “Leap Forward”**

In his younger works that Marx wrote with Frederick Engels, especially in *The German Ideology* he criticizes the contemporary handling of the relationships between “idea” and “reality,” while undertaking the major task of creating a new understanding of the world. One way to see this general attitude is simply maintaining that if Marx and Engels could find a way to analyse reality and its relationship with ideas once and for all, they could eradicate “bourgeois and petit bourgeois” ideologies, and could finally bring thinking to its proper path where we should no longer be worried about ideas being out of reach or false, as long as we are within the boundaries of Marxism. This perspective differentiates between science and ideology, and holds that the true essence of things can be seen through science while ideology masks reality. However, a different way to approach it is to think that the relationship between ideas and reality can be established in proper way, in which the ideas—whether they are from Marx or Jesus or Feuerbach—are always subdued to another reality that encompasses them.

At this point, I would like to distinguish two kinds of “activities” Marx undertakes. They are on different stages of consciousness. First is the more familiar one to most people, a similar work that is done in the name of “orthodox Marxism” or the “scientific conception of Marxism,” while the other is the subjective element’s activity that is put forward by Marx. The critical method employed by Marx and Engels is composed of seeing the object of cognition in its falsely constructed form, and by seeing it so they reconstruct the object based on a more correct understanding. The account for this accuracy does not reside in the false construction of the object but in the sciences, as they claim. In addition to this distinction, Torrance (1995, 45–47), also claims that, Marx distinguishes between knowledge of appearance and essential knowledge. In doing so, Marx creates a division between everyday knowledge of the people, such as “the Sun sets,” and the scientific knowledge “the Earth is revolving around the Sun.” However, although he distinguishes between these two aspects of seemingly same phenomenon, he does not classify them as the correct or the false ones. On the contrary, he says that both of them are true in their own right, since they are based on the practice and daily life of the individuals involved.

Moreover, it is this level of consciousness that grounds its truth with respect to the truth of other two levels by making this manoeuvre. I think this is exactly the Marxist method in *The German Ideology*, where the authors’ do not criticize the



primary level in detail, but strike at the pseudo-scientific “bourgeoisie” conceptions of religion, state, family and so on. This argument is structurally very similar to circular epistemology of Hegel.

In their own critique of bourgeoisie ideology;

The products of their brains have got out of their hands. They, the creators, have bowed down before their creations. Let us liberate them from the chimeras, the ideas, dogmas, imaginary beings under the yoke of which they are pining away. Let us revolt against this rule of concepts. (Marx and Engels 1976a, 23)

This is already in the preface, and the question “Are you going to be able to hold the product of your brains,” can thus be answered from the subject’s position here. Their own concepts are grounded by their subjective relationship to their own concepts. This leap towards a higher level of consciousness makes it possible to see the previous consciousness’ scientific activity, and grant it truth hood by seeing that it is not absolutely true, but can only be perceived true as such with a subject that is related to its object.

In practical understanding, an objection of Marx to the Marxist terms can be seen within this respect. Take class, for example, for the orthodox Marxist it might be easy to define society in two distinct classes, such as the proletariat and bourgeoisie. However, as Chandra (2002) claims that there is no strict definition—at least from Marx and Engels—of one of the presumably most central concepts of Marxism: class. Moreover, Chandra also shows how they altered their definition of class in different works.

## Marxist Orthodoxy

Orthodox Marxism is considered to be many things. Mandelson (1979, 76) claims that orthodox Marxism was a project that was proposed by Engels as a reply to the leadership divide within the SPD, and the main points were concentrated around finding a “world outlook” that could “unify truth,” and creating a materialist ontology as the basis as well as a functioning rigid and static mechanism for dialectics. Eventually, the dialectic itself became a static understanding of the world, devoid of its critical tendency.

In current discussions, this understanding of orthodox Marxism is the most agreeable definition, since the proponents of orthodox Marxism can then still somehow defend a position, some sort of “objective” conception of the world, devoid of any

subjective approach, and can call it a “scientific” or “true” understanding of the world. Being such, Marxism can be used to fight against “false consciousness” or “ideology,” since it is the one and only true depiction of the world, and so other approaches towards the world can only be wrong, similar to any other scientific realist approach.

One very interesting definition of orthodox Marxism is put forward much earlier, when orthodox Marxism hadn't yet suffered many objections from different political and social movements, and many different geographies. As early as in 1919, Georg Lukács used a definition of orthodox Marxism that was much different than what is in circulation today. Lukács starts the first chapter of his book, *History and Class Consciousness* (1971) by quoting the famous 11th thesis of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*. It is no coincidence that this is exactly his position for his understanding of the correct conception of Marxism. Although orthodox Marxism is conceived to be many things, I believe that one of the most accurate is the one used by Lukács.

Orthodox Marxism, therefore, does not imply the uncritical acceptance of the results of Marx's investigations. It is not the “belief” in this or that thesis, nor the exegesis of a “sacred” book. On the contrary, orthodoxy refers exclusively to *method*. It is the scientific conviction that dialectical materialism is the road to truth and that its methods can be developed, expanded and deepened only along the lines laid down by its founders. It is the conviction, moreover, that all attempts to surpass or “improve” it have led and must lead to over-simplification, triviality and eclecticism. (Lukács 1971, 1, his emphasis)

The most notable point here is obviously how he contrasts the results of Marx's investigations and his method. As exemplified by Mandelson, the general opinion today is that orthodox Marxism is the end result of Marxist study, leading to concrete schematics of society, economy and philosophy. However, there is also a contradiction in Lukács's conception. Although he starts with advocating orthodox Marxism as a method, he eventually ends up saying that attempts for improving or surpassing dialectical materialism will not lead us to any productive end. I believe that on this point his understanding of orthodox Marxism is explained much clearer than his understanding of dialectical materialism. On this argument, it makes sense to see that both Mandelson and Lukács—as well as the common conception today—are pointing towards the direction that orthodox Marxism is an accumulation of the end results in Marxist theory. Moreover, Lukács also emphasizes the subjective element in his writing, retaining the main corpus that is shared in both Hegel and Marx, that is taking social relationship as a medium for knowledge.



Only in this context which sees the isolated facts of social life as aspects of the historical process and integrates them in a totality, can knowledge of the facts hope to become knowledge of reality. This knowledge starts from the simple (and to the capitalist world), pure, immediate, natural determinants described above. It progresses from them to the knowledge of the concrete totality, i.e. to the conceptual reproduction of reality. This concrete totality is by no means an unmediated datum for thought. (Lukács 1971, 8)

My working definition of orthodox Marxism is the same in its essence. The end results of Marxist inquiry, such as defining society as fundamentally divided into two classes or noting the dominance of infrastructure under every circumstance over superstructure, while being the results of Marxist inquiry, are not “ultimate” laws or relationships. Moreover, if we assume that Marxism works like a science—a claim which most orthodox Marxists will agree with—then we have to assume the criticisms that the philosophy of science put forward also apply to for. Such criticisms like those of Hacking (1983) or Cartwright (1984) show us that referring to the “laws of nature” as if they are unchanging discoveries without a subject’s cognitive or interventive capabilities is not possible.

On this law-like and productive perception of Marxism, Gronow (2016, 20–22) states that “laws” that are based on Marx’s *Capital* were some of the most important kernels of orthodox Marxism. And such “laws” were considered to be more general in their explanation than the timescale of the capitalist mode of production, they were seen as general laws of history that could apply to history in its totality. As proposed by Fleetwood (2012), such law-like structures, when seen as ultimate laws rather than special kinds of tendencies, are shown to be not very useful for Marxist political economy—the field that is considered to be the exemplar of the Marxist way of doing science.

### **Mao’s Theoretical Orthodoxy; *Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society***

Written in 1927, around the time when the First United Front was in a very unstable state, Mao’s *Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society* is a text that can be used to observe how Mao categorizes classes. In this text, Mao considers different classes in China. Although the multiplicity of the classes in his analysis might be seen as unorthodox, Marx himself used the analysis of many different classes in his own writings as late as *Critique of the Gotha Programme* as in the following: “Did anyone proclaim to the artisans, small manufacturers, etc., and peasants

during the last elections: In relation to us you, together with the bourgeoisie and feudal lords, form only one reactionary mass?" (Marx and Engels 1989, 89).

This was written by Karl Marx in 1875 to criticize German Social Democratic Party's new programme. In this text it is clear that Marx recognizes the existence of other classes than bourgeois and proletariat. It is also very clear that Marx employs other classes in his analyses in his earlier works, such as *Communist Manifesto* (1848). That vulgar Marxist criticism put aside, let us see how Mao organizes the classes in society.

For Mao in *Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society*, although there are many classes which are considered within the text, they are analysed based on two of their properties. One is the economic analysis, that sees the classes in society based on their economic relationships. In the economic analysis, Mao names six main classes, and finds many subclasses within them. The classes are evaluated based on their relationship to the means of production, but also with respect to their material wealth. Moreover, their economic situation is observed within their ability to change classes based on their capacity to be able to accumulate financial gains or not, and due to this degrade to a lower class, upgrade to a higher class or protect their presence within their own class. In addition, their main standings as a general class is affecting changes in their class position strongly. Marx and Engels also propose something very similar in *Communist Manifesto*:

The lower strata of the middle class—the small tradespeople, shopkeepers, and retired tradesmen generally, the handicraftsmen and peasants—all these sink gradually into the proletariat, partly because their diminutive capital does not suffice for the scale on which Modern Industry is carried on, and is swamped in the competition with the large capitalists, partly because their specialized skill is rendered worthless by new methods of production. (Engels and Marx 1976b, 491–92)

Mao also analyses the classes of China politically. When he considers the political behaviour of various classes, he does so with respect to their attitude towards the revolution and working class leadership. When he writes about the intermediate classes politically, he sees that the classes will eventually dissolve into two big camps.

The intermediate classes are bound to disintegrate quickly, some sections turning left to join the revolution, others turning right to join the counter-revolution; there is no room for them to remain "independent" (ibid. 14).

The relationship is obviously similar to how Marx writes about the political struggle of the classes in *Communist Manifesto*. Marx and Engels already propose that when the revolutionary struggle is heightened, the two camps will emerge not only from the primary antagonistic classes of the proletariat and bourgeois, but the other classes will have to pick a side, based on their economic relationships, and even part of the bourgeois will side with the proletariat.

In this sense, Mao is rather a structuralist, although conceptually not exactly an orthodox Marxist. He sees that the basis of the social reality, that is the economic activity, shapes peoples' lives and their consciousness, and eventually their political activity.

The link between the infrastructure and superstructure is very clear in this text:

The owner-peasants and the master handicraftsmen are both engaged in small-scale production. Although all strata of this class have the same petty-bourgeois economic status, they fall into three different sections. The first section consists of those who have some surplus money or grain, that is, those who, by manual or mental labour, earn more each year than they consume for their own support. Such people very much want to get rich and are devout worshippers of Marshal Chao; ... This section is a minority among the petty bourgeoisie and constitutes its right-wing. ... The third section consists of those whose standard of living is falling. ... Such people are quite important for the revolutionary movement; they form a mass of no small proportions and are the left-wing of the petty bourgeoisie. In normal times these three sections of the petty bourgeoisie differ in their attitude to the revolution. But in times of war, that is, when the tide of the revolution runs high and the dawn of victory is in sight, not only will the left-wing of the petty bourgeoisie join the revolution, but the middle section too may join, and even right-wingers, ... will have to go along with the revolution. (Mao 1965, 15–16)

The analysis is functional; he sees classes with respect to their relationship to the social reality instead of “pure” economic categories, and their relationship to revolutionary activity as well as their subjective position within war and peace alike, which are factors that can lead them to taking different sides. I claim it is obvious that Mao can and does employ fundamental Marxist social theory with expertise as well as being politically in the same line with Marx. Mao is also a materialist in the Marxist sense, since he holds that it is the material relations of production that shape the consciousness and sociality of individuals. Knight (2005), also analyses Mao's knowledge of Marxism and his ability to conceive the classes of the Chinese

society, and concludes that both from other Chinese scholars and his own reading of Marxism, Mao was capable of structuring a Marxist analysis in China.

### **Mao's Epistemology and Negation of the Theory; *On Practice***

Strict conceptual and theoretical Marxist orthodoxy is achieved by Mao, however as indicated earlier by Lukács in 1919, a better way to search for Marxist orthodoxy is through method. Mao's primary work in this regard, about the role of the theory and the flexibility of the theory manifests itself in what is contradictory to theory, for him, namely practice.

Healy (1990) holds that Mao's epistemology is rather Marxist in the sense that Mao distinguishes between superstructure and infrastructure, as well as accepting their correspondence on certain occasions, although retaining that they are of distinct nature. Knight (1990), in a similar line, notes that Mao's epistemology is Marxist, in the sense that Mao prioritizes matter over mind. However, these are very general understandings of Marxism. They sweep the possible differences within under the rug, leading to the conclusion that any analysis which differentiates between infrastructure and superstructure, and holds infrastructure as more important than superstructure, is Marxist. A better way to see how Mao employs the theory is to look at a concrete Chinese example and how he relates reality to theory and other sources of knowledge in his *On Practice* (1936). Mao's position with respect to theories is very clear and "revisionist" in the sense that he holds that theories themselves do not depict reality as it is. "But generally speaking, whether in the practice of changing nature or of changing society, men's original ideas, theories, plans or programmes are seldom realized without any alteration." (Mao 1965, 305) This is Mao's explicit position with respect to theories in general. Here Mao acknowledges the reality of the theory, ideas, and plans, however, while being still centered around theory, he believes that the plan can be altered through the relationships it has with what it is operational on, he says that the theories may be those of engineering, science or revolutionary struggle, and in this sense his epistemology is not limited to social theory. However, this is a "mistake" for Lukács, as he claims "When the ideal of scientific knowledge is applied to nature it simply furthers the progress of science. But when it is applied to society it turns out to be an ideological weapon of the bourgeoisie." (1971, 10)

Despite this, Mao's epistemology is applied to all "knowledge" regardless of their domains. Since he already leaves Marxist theory within the limitations of theory, attention should be shifted to other areas to find a Marxist orthodoxy, and one way to find it is through a more general epistemology, and the other is through the similarity of Hegelian/Marxist consciousness and Mao's consciousness.

One interesting link between Mao and Hegelian consciousness is found by Boer. Boer (2017) finds Mao's philosophical works in Yan'an show a Hegelian consciousness with respect to conscious subjectivity. He holds that Mao studied Lenin extensively, and cited him most often in his philosophical works *On Contradiction* and *On Practice*, even though he did not read Marx or Engels directly from original sources. In addition to this, what Mao cited in these works is the most Hegelian work of Lenin, *Philosophical Notebooks*, which Lenin wrote in 1914–1915 when he was in exile in Bern, Switzerland, where he studied Hegel thoroughly. In addition to Boer's account, Knight (2005, 71) also claims that the Marxist orthodoxy—when orthodoxy is defined pragmatically as the party's accepted line—is constructed around Soviet Union's New Philosophy. The New Philosophy was widely read by the CCP leadership, including Mao. In retrospect, canonized in 1928, the New Philosophy can be seen as some sort of a balance between the ideas of its predecessor, more Hegelian Deborinites, followers of Hegel and Plekhanov, and its successor, a more Stalinist mechanistic understanding of the world. Within the perspective of the New Philosophy, there is a role for subjectivity against pure determinism.

The New Philosophy frowned on a strictly economic determinist reading of Marxism. "Economic materialism," as it came to be known in Soviet philosophical and historical circles in the early 1930s, had argued for the decisive role of the economic base in historical change and development; the superstructure and human consciousness were mere reflections of the economic base. (Knight 2005, 81)

In this sense, Mao was epistemologically orthodox. The limitations of a subjective element are obvious from the detachment from theory on one hand, and the negation of theory due to concrete circumstances is on the other. On this grounds, Dirlik (1983) claims that it was Marxist theory which "tamed" Mao's subjectivity. Yet, if there is alteration in the theory, the theory itself is not complete or true in this level. On the necessity of altering the theory due to its incapacity to represent truth, Mao says that:

This is because people engaged in changing reality are usually subject to numerous limitations; they are limited not only by existing scientific and technological conditions but also by the development of the objective process itself and the degree to which this process has become manifest (the aspects and the essence of the objective process have not yet been fully revealed). In such a situation, ideas, theories, plans or programmes are usually altered partially and sometimes even wholly, because of the discovery of unforeseen circumstances in the course of practice. That is to

say, it does happen that the original ideas, theories, plans or programmes fail to correspond with reality either in whole or in part and are wholly or partially incorrect. (Mao 1965, 306)

This quotation shows Mao's general understanding of the role of the theory. It can be seen that he operates on three levels here, first "as things should be," second "how we think we can analyse them," and third, "the world that changes our theory." Since Mao himself did not engage in the development of Marxist theory in abstract or "scientific" terms, but was involved in "applying the theory" to the concrete circumstances, it is convenient that he starts from the abstractions of the theory to negate them with practice. I think this perspective is still a Marxist one, since Marx himself claims in *Capital* that, because economic science is not equipped with the instruments that the other sciences possess, he has to use abstractions in place of other tools to engage with reality. And although these abstractions can become guidelines, there is no reason for them not to be mistaken. However, the difference we see in *On Practice* is that, instead of a Marxist consciousness that tries to engage the reality under the appearance, Mao relies on refinement and falsification practices to find the truth. This is not orthodox in Marxist epistemology or the Marxist understanding of theory.

Discover the truth through practice, and again through practice verify and develop the truth. Start from perceptual knowledge and actively develop it into rational knowledge; then start from rational knowledge and actively guide revolutionary practice to change both the subjective and the objective world. Practice, knowledge, again practice, and again knowledge. (ibid., 308)

Half of this seems almost Popperian, in the sense that a given theory should be falsified or verified, and when falsification is the case, the false parts of the theory should be abandoned and new theories should arise. The other half is on the other hand, very Hegelian, the knowledge of perception should be turned into rational knowledge within the medium of practice. The theory as an object outside the subject, is reformed through the subject's attempts. Therefore, I think epistemologically, Mao is orthodox so far as he embraces both Marx's scientific, mature look towards knowledge, and at the same time his young, Hegelian understanding of knowledge as a process. The orthodoxies are twofold, and the fidelity to different aspects of Marxism creates a novel understanding of Marxism.

These were from the concluding remarks of *On Practice*. But is this some sort of truth in the sense that it approaches reality? If it is the case, we can already see that the negation of the initial concrete Marxist theory that Mao distinguishes in



*On the Analysis of the Classes of Chinese Society* from something that is external to the theory is, I claim, the Marxist subjectivity. The subject mitigates the transition from the abstract theory to an external reality. The “ideal” theory in its abstractness is negated, and because of the Hegelian nature of this negation, the subject looks for something external, the subject will try to find this ground in a different ontology, and for Mao this is *On Contradiction*.

On the other hand, if we consider that the subjective interpretation of the theory is eventually dependent on “what the world is like,” there is a staunch objectivism in this position. If the alteration of the theory is due to the certain set of relationships that exist in the world, eventually the theory will end up depicting what the world is like. This depiction, in turn, might not be too much of a revolutionary theory.

### Mao’s Subjectivity and Negation of Negation; *On Contradiction*

Mao works within a Marxist theoretical framework when he negates the “scientific” claims of Marxism with a Marxist consciousness. Even so, he uses the conception “Marxist theory of knowledge” in many places in these works instead of using “Marxism” or “Marxist theory.” He understands that Marxism provides him with a theory, a theory which he works both within and on. Interestingly though, Mao uses the term “theory” more than twice as much in his *On Practice* than *On Contradiction*, I believe that this is because he negates the theory by practice, while in *On Contradiction*, he is creating an ontology, not a methodology or epistemology. These eventually are exactly the lacking elements in his analysis, and he ends up with an ontology that has almost no epistemology. Although he ended *On Practice* with a very objectivist account, where the external reality changes our theories and we should not only allow it to do so, but facilitate the process *On Contradiction* draws a much different world. I claimed that Mao negated the theory with reality in *On Practice*, and here he negates the objectivist account of *On Practice*. However how far he goes here and if he could achieve a level of consciousness that allows for the negation of negation to hold are not very easy to determine.

In the first part of the text “The Two World Outlooks,” Mao gives an account of the world where the world itself is loaded with contradictions. At first, he draws a historical account of human thought where different groups of thinkers were always in contradiction; on one hand there were metaphysical outlooks and on the other hand there was the dialectical outlook. However, Mao considers even the relatively correct dialectical outlook incomplete, since it was not dialectical materialist outlook that is supposed to give the true depiction. It is important to note

here that he does not contrast metaphysics with materialism, but with dialectical materialism, since throughout the text he asserts his place between mechanism—that is a branch of materialism—and metaphysics, attacking both to solidify his own position. This move against both right and left-wing deviations is a common theme in Leninist parties (Or Communist Parties as they were called in 30s). Knight (2005) also reports that for Mao philosophy had a “party character,” which is to say that philosophy should provide a worldview for the party and it should not be an understanding of the world that merely tries to unify knowledge. Meisner (1971) also claims that Mao’s organizational principles were genuinely Leninist, thus making Mao a defender of the “party line” of the philosophical orthodoxy. This basically means that the party creates a philosophy in order to locate party in the correct line of the spectrum and limit the behaviour of the party periphery and this way solidify centralism.

This understanding of the party line puts Mao in a subjectivist position again. Although there are many contradictions that occur, the party should pick a side on these and defend itself from possible deviations coming from both left and right. In the next chapter, “Universality of Contradiction,” Mao elaborates on what he understands from contradiction, asserting an ontological claim that in the world there are many different contradictions, even in the natural sciences or mathematics. In his words:

The universality or absoluteness of contradiction has a twofold meaning. One is that contradiction exists in the process of development of all things, and the other is that in the process of development of each thing a movement of opposites exists from beginning to end. (Mao 1965, 316)

Therefore, Mao has two claims, one is that there is a positive aspect of contradiction, and that development is possible only through contradiction. This claim is a somewhat Hegelian in ontology; it is only through contradiction that development is possible. The second one is the counter claim, that the contradiction that occurs during development is constant. The second claim does not only say that contradiction necessarily leads to development, but also the contradiction of opposites is constant through the whole process.

This is the claim which I find rather unorthodox in many senses, since in the traditional Hegelian or Marxist dialectics a contradiction is expected to occur within a certain process, leading to another stage in development. However, Mao claims that contradiction is constant, in every development and every process and never-ending. He will later use this claim to justify the changing priorities of the revolution.

In the next chapter, “Particularity of Contradiction,” Mao makes another move. Since in the previous chapter the concept of contradiction was very abstract and

it was difficult to use it in concrete cases and within geographical, historical and similar limitations, he proposes that the particular aspects of the contradiction form a different structure. Eventually, similar to his distinction between theory and practice, we see a divide in ontology.

Of course, unless we understand the universality of contradiction, we have no way of discovering the universal cause or universal basis for the movement or development of things; however, unless we study the particularity of contradiction, we have no way of determining the particular essence of a thing which differentiates it from other things, no way of discovering the particular cause or particular basis for the movement or development of a thing, and no way of distinguishing one thing from another or of demarcating the fields of science. (Mao 1965, 320)

This way, Mao rearranges his ontological structure to yield a dualism, where the abstract principles of contradiction are at work in the world, although we are in need of understanding certain particularities to be able to place each particularity in its proper general field. The gap between our understanding of a thing and the thing itself is laid open here again. Mao's naïve realism in that regard is very strong, the world of contradiction exists independently from us, while our understanding of contradiction, when done properly, will lead to a concrete result. This way, the objectivism that was in *On Practice* is negated to a form of dualism. While Mao still holds that reality is "out there," our understanding of it will lead us to a correct grasping of it.

From here, Mao moves to an organization of this ontology in the next chapter, "The Principle Contradiction and the Principle Aspect of Contradiction." In this chapter the contradiction between subjectivity and objectivity reaches its peak. On the objective side, Mao seems to be in line with Marxist orthodoxy in that he accepts the main schemes of Marxism in the social and economic domains. Although he concurs that objectively there are other contradictions in everything that develops, as he already claimed in the previous chapter, there is a primary contradiction in the complex processes where there are many different contradictory elements in the overall development. Dirlik (1983, 197) claims that the idea of principle contradiction is the element that saves Mao from detachment from Marxism, since it subordinates other contradictions under the same theoretical structure, the one principle contradiction that subdues them all, however this move did not stop Mao from interpreting the principle contradiction subjectively in the long term. The second half of the text expresses this subjective element under the name the principle aspect of contradiction.

For instance, in capitalist society the two forces in contradiction, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, form the principal contradiction. The other contradictions, such as those between the remnant feudal class and the bourgeoisie, ... are all determined or influenced by this principal contradiction. (Mao 1965, 331)

Here it is obvious that Mao is following an objective Marxist line of contradiction, it is as if he reaffirmed his position in *Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society* through the negation of his own position in *On Practice*. However, he eventually moves to an extreme subjectivist position from there. Mao proposes something extraordinary, already embedded in his writings. While talking about the principle aspect of contradiction he claims that “when the principal aspect which has gained predominance changes, the nature of a thing changes accordingly” (ibid., 333). The idea is that the subject’s position with respect to reality alters the reality somehow. This way, Mao creates a disunited world, while many things in life are in contradiction, the subject is able to choose the primary contradiction amongst the many. Knight (1990, 20–21) also make the analysis that, although Mao employs “three laws of dialectics” in his Yan’an period, “negation of the negation” is used less frequently than the other laws. Furthermore, he makes the analysis that Mao adheres to law of contradiction as the primary law of dialectics. In Mao’s later writings, he also notes, the usage of “negation of the negation” became less frequent and the meaning of negation became both ambiguous, and most often among its usages was the in the meaning of “reaching to an agreement of two opposing sides.”

Eventually, in the next chapter, “The Identity and Struggle of the Aspects of a Contradiction,” Mao somehow solves the problem by providing limitations for the contradiction to operate. However, the problem is persistent, there is no determining limit for the aspects of contradiction. Mao takes the divided aspects of a process as opposing elements of contradiction, and these aspects remain within the contradiction, yet there is no direction for the struggle of the opposites to channel, there is no predetermined path and even no criterion for choosing a side within the contradiction, let alone choosing the principle aspect of contradiction.

Without its opposite aspect, each loses the condition for its existence. Just think, can anyone contradictory aspect of a thing or of a concept in the human mind exist independently? Without life, there would be no death; without death, there would be no life. (Mao 1965, 338)

The negation of an aspect of the counterpart seems to go on forever. This is the point where Žižek also criticizes Mao about his lack of end result, negation of

negation, contradiction ending to create something new at some point, leaving the previous contradiction at its end or Hegelian *Aufheben*.

Back in 1953, the young Louis Althusser published a text in *La revue de l'enseignement philosophique* in which he congratulated Stalin for rejecting the “negation of negation” as a universal law of dialectics, a rejection shared by Mao. It is easy to understand this rejection as the expression of the spirit of struggle, of “one divides into two”: there is no reunification, no final synthesis, the struggle goes on forever. However, the Hegelian dialectical “synthesis” has to be clearly delimited from the “synthesis-of-the-opposites” model with which it is as a rule identified. (Žižek 2013, 300)

The problem of the revolutionary consciousness of Mao can thus be seen within this perspective. Although Mao goes through various phases of dialectical consciousness, he does not eventually settle for the negation of negation of the original position. Although he negates the negation, this negation is not towards a direction, it is a divergent negation which does not enable him to formulate the limits of the consciousness or the metric of subjective activity. This is why Mao swings between a stark objectivity on his assertion of the classical Marxist categories first and the belief in an objective world secondly and a hyper subjective interpretation of Marxism at his third move.

In the last chapter of *On Contradiction*, “The Place of Antagonism in Contradiction,” it looks like Mao is aware of this problem that he is not able to reach a level of consciousness that enables him to hold the contradictory elements through the process of knowing. In order to solve this, Mao differentiates between antagonism and contradiction briefly. However, this difference, although it places an objective element to contradictions that are antagonisms, still does not provide a criterion for choosing how to make this distinction.

## Conclusion

This work provides one perspective to a very general, diverse, and thorny collection of issues. However, when one is entitled to the certain assumptions made during the paper, I think the following conclusions are in order.

Mao uses different orthodoxies through these three texts. The conceptual orthodoxy he employs in *Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society* is eventually replaced by an epistemological orthodoxy in *On Practice*, which moves towards an objectivist

account. In *On Contradiction*, Mao negates the objectivist position for the sake of an ontology, an ontology that can be used in turbulent political times where alliances and conflicts are changing rapidly. However, as Mao develops this ontology, he still relies on some kind of naïve realism, he holds that the contradictions are eternal and the principle contradictions will arise by themselves, although the subject has a limitless control over them. The very eternal character of his understanding of contradictions, this way, obstructs the possibility of final negation to yield into the formation of a new consciousness.

Against the consciousness that insists on its position being the Absolute—in this example the orthodox Marxists who relentlessly resisted the idea of moving to the rural areas, towards peasantry, at the expense of abandoning the urban proletariat—Mao could enable himself a negation of the orthodoxy of this kind. In the times when there were many supporters of non-interference by Communists in their country's struggle against Japanese imperialism, even when it meant tactical alliances with the Kuomintang, Mao could “bend” the theory, with a Marxist subjectivity. The very reason for the failure of the orthodoxy is the illusion of seeing their current position as the final stage of consciousness. Mao knew that he was not in the final stage, but from these texts it can be seen that he also asserts that there is no final one. The negation is negated, not towards an end, but towards eternity, and whether the subject will be able to hold the theory and practice together is not bound by any rule, as its measure is left to be only itself.

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