

“Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement.” Lenin, *What Is To Be Done*

Dialectical Materialism:

MAO'S “ON PRACTICE”

In the last article we described the spread of the Soviet formulation of dialectical materialism in China, which was called the “new philosophy” there. In 1936 and 1937 Mao Zedong (and a study group he led) carefully studied the Soviet textbooks and the work of Chinese communist philosophers, and produced the manuscript *Lecture Notes on Dialectical Materialism*.

The topics and the views advocated in this text are quite similar to the Soviet texts, but also emphasized the specific situation in China. Two essays from this work were widely circulated, “On Practice” and “On Contradiction.” Here we give a brief outline of “On Practice,” but the whole article is worth studying carefully.

Mao wrote that social practice alone is the source of all our knowledge and the criterion of truth. “Social practice” includes a variety of activities, but the three most important are pro-

duction, class struggle, and scientific experiments. The most fundamental of these is material production. In production, people come to understand their relationship to nature and to varying degrees, the social relations among people. Production is “the primary source from which human knowledge develops.” The rise of the working class and large-scale production makes possible a comprehensive, scientific understanding of society, which is Marxism.

Mao wrote that for knowledge of the world, human social practice is the “sole criterion of truth.” This means that when we make plans and base them on what we think is true, the practical result shows whether our thinking was right or not. Success is evidence that our thinking is true or close to the truth. Failure shows that we must revise our ideas and test the new ideas in practice.

Mao divided knowledge into two stages. The

first stage is information about phenomena. Phenomena are what can be perceived by the senses or are easily recognized, superficial information that doesn’t show hidden connections between things. Mao’s example: what visitors might learn from a tour of the Yan’an liberated area.

The second stage requires the formation of concepts that can be applied to phenomena and explain them. These concepts have to be thought up in the course of trying to understand the phenomena, “arranging and reconstructing” the data of perception.

Concepts are qualitatively different from the phenomena they apply to. They show the true nature and inner connection of the phenomena and allow logical conclusions to be drawn. The result is knowledge of true theories, which Mao calls “logical” or “rational” knowledge. Quoting

Lenin, Mao cites “matter,” “laws of nature” and (economic) “value” as examples of concepts.

The first, perceptual stage of knowledge is the basis for the second, higher theoretical stage, so that “all knowledge originates in perception of the objective external world through man’s physical sense organs.” Knowledge from both perceptual and theoretical stages is needed to guide practice, and can be corrected when practice goes wrong.

Mao distinguished between a person’s direct experience and his or her indirect experience, information from the experience of other people. Although he wrote that most knowledge comes from indirect experience, Mao insisted that specific kinds of knowledge require personal participation. “If you want to know the structure and

properties of the atom you must

make physical and chemical experiments to change the state of the atom. If you want to know the theory and methods of revolution, you must take part in revolution.”

Mao discusses several wrong views in the theory of knowledge that have important consequences for the communist movement. One error is to think that knowledge can stop at the first, perceptual stage, and that rational knowledge is not reliable. This anti-theory view is called “empiricism.” Empiricism fails to understand that perceptual knowledge is superficial and one-sided, and fails to get to the essence, to the inner laws that govern a thing and reflect its totality.

The second serious error is “rationalism,” a view that sees theory as independent of perceptual knowledge. Rational knowledge always depends on perceptual knowledge derived from

practice, and needs to be corrected by failures and partial successes in practice. Thus the internal contradictions of knowledge drive the process of the growth of knowledge.

The whole point of rational knowledge, knowledge of true theories, is to reveal the essence and inner nature of things, which makes consistent success in practice possible. In particular, rational knowledge of communist politics, economics and philosophy is essential to guide our struggle for communism.

