

ON PRACTICE & ON CONTRADICTION

MAO ZEDONG

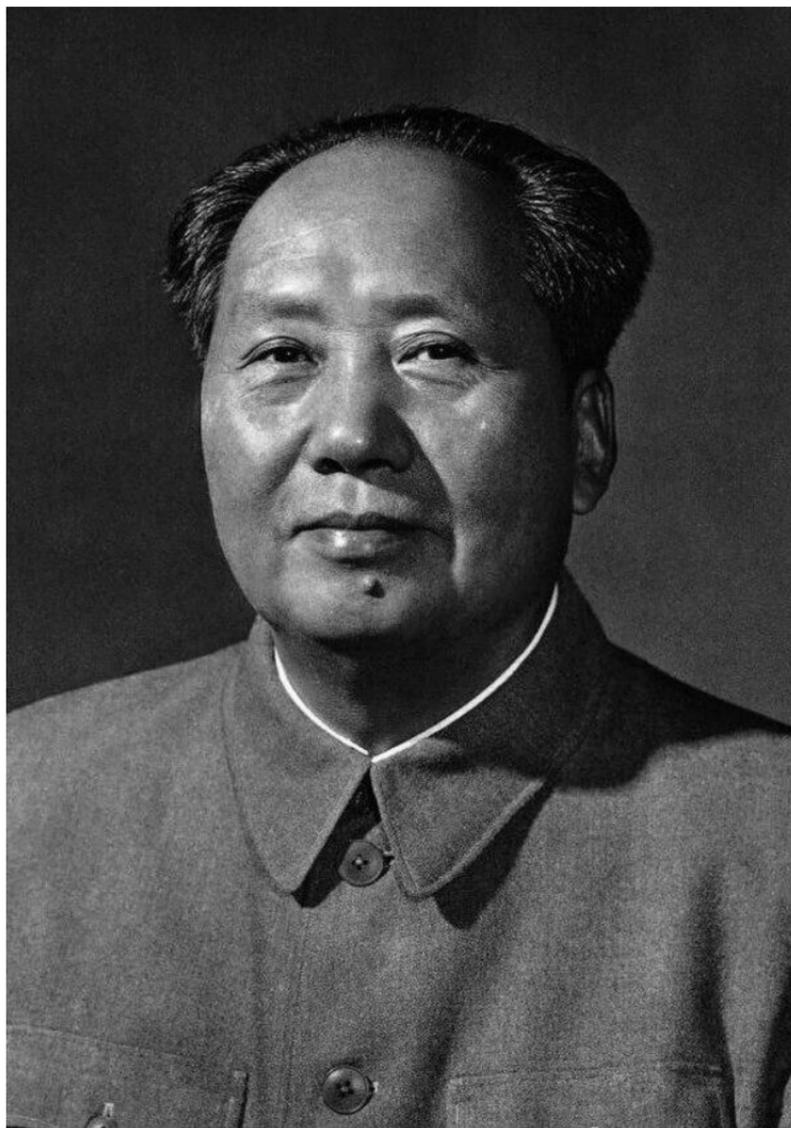


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I.

On Practice

Preface

There used to be a number of comrades in our Party who were dogmatists and who for a long period rejected the experience of the Chinese Revolution, denying the truth that “Marxism is not a dogma but a guide to action” and over-awing people with words and phrases from Marxist works, torn out of context. There were also a number of comrades who were empiricists and who for a long period restricted themselves to their own fragmentary experience and did not understand the importance of theory for revolutionary practice or see the revolution as a whole, but worked blindly though industriously. The erroneous ideas of these two types of comrades, and particularly of the dogmatists, caused enormous losses to the Chinese Revolution during 1931-34, and yet the dogmatists cloaking themselves as Marxists, confused a great many comrades.

On Practice was written in order to expose the subjectivist errors of dogmatism and empiricism in the Party, and especially the error of dogmatism, from the standpoint of the Marxist theory of knowledge. It was entitled *On Practice* because its stress was on exposing the dogmatist kind of subjectivism, which belittles practice. The ideas contained in this essay were presented by Comrade Mao Zedong in a lecture at the Anti-Japanese Military and Political College in Yanan.

On Practice

Before Marx, materialism examined the problem of knowledge apart from the social nature of Man and apart from his historical development, and was therefore incapable of understanding the dependence of knowledge on social practice, that is, the dependence of knowledge on production and the class struggle. Above all, Marxists regard Man's activity in production as the most fundamental practical activity, the determinant of all his other activities. Man's knowledge depends mainly on his activity in material production, through which he comes gradually to understand the phenomena, the properties and the laws of nature, and the relations between himself and nature; and through his activity in production he also gradually comes to understand, in varying degrees, certain relations that exist between man and man. None of this knowledge can be acquired apart from activity in production.

In a classless society every person, as a member of society, joins in common effort with the other members, enters into definite relations of production with them and engages in production to meet man's material needs. In all class societies, the members of the different social classes also enter, in different ways, into definite relations of production and engage in production to meet their material needs. This is the primary source from which human knowledge develops.

Man's social practice is not confined to activity in production, but takes many other forms – class struggle, political life, scientific and artistic pursuits; in short, as a social being, Man participates in all spheres of the practical life of society. Thus Man, in varying degrees, comes to know the different relations between man and man, not only through his material life but also through his political and cultural life (both of which are intimately bound up with material life). Of these other types of social practice, class struggle in particular, in all its various forms, exerts a profound influence on the development of Man's knowledge.

In class society everyone lives as a member of a particular class, and every kind of thinking, without exception, is stamped with the brand of a class. Marxists hold that in human society activity in production develops step by step from a lower to a higher level and that consequently Man's knowledge, whether of nature or of society, also develops step by step from a lower to a higher level, that is, from the shallower to the deeper, from the one-sided to the many-sided. For a very long period in history, men were necessarily confined to a one-sided understanding of the history of society because, for one thing, the bias of the exploiting classes always distorted history and, for another, the small scale of production limited Man's outlook. It was not until the modern proletariat emerged along with immense forces of production (large-scale industry) that Man was able to acquire a comprehensive, historical understanding of the development of society and turn this knowledge into a science, the science of Marxism.

Marxists hold that Man's social practice alone is the criterion of the truth of his knowledge of the external world. What actually happens is that Man's knowledge is verified only when he achieves the anticipated results in the process of social practice (material production, class struggle, or scientific experiment). If a man wants to succeed in his work, that is, to achieve the anticipated results, he must bring his ideas into correspondence with the laws of the objective external world; if they do not correspond, he will fail in his practice. After he fails, he draws his lessons, corrects his ideas to make them correspond to the laws of the external world, and can thus turn failure into success; this is what is meant by "failure is the mother of success" and "a fall into the pit, a gain in your wit."

The dialectical materialist theory of knowledge places practice in the primary position, holding that human knowledge can in no way be separated from practice and repudiating all the erroneous theories which deny the importance of practice or separate knowledge from practice. Thus Lenin said, "Practice is higher than (theoretical) knowledge, for it has not only the dignity of universality, but also of immediate actuality."¹ The Marxist philosophy of dialectical materialism has two outstanding characteristics. One is its class nature: it openly avows that dialectical materialism is in the service of the proletariat. The other is its practicality: it emphasizes the dependence of theory on practice, emphasizes that theory is based on practice

¹V. I. Lenin, *Conspectus of Hegel's The Science of Logic* (Collected Works, Russ. ed., Moscow, 1958, Vol. XXXVIII, p. 205).