

ON MASS REBELLIONS AND CORRECT IDEAS

Maoist Communist Group

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The following document came out of a recent exchange with another Maoist organization regarding the role of mass rebellions in formulating principles, line, and program. Our view: those who persist in organizing the masses around ideas born in the daily struggle will find themselves unable to advance the revolutionary process. Marxist-Leninist-Maoists must instead organize the masses around elements of program constructed of ideas that emerge in mass rebellions.

Broadly speaking, the piece is the result of summing up a period of mass work that began in 2015 and came to an end in late 2017. During this period, we focused on organizing tenants in low-income buildings. The class situations in which we intervened were diverse: a struggle against a management company that illegally entered homes, spied on tenants, and bullied them into surrendering bank statements in an attempt to revoke income-based rent subsidies; a landlord who petitioned HUD to raise all rents above what anyone could possibly afford; a low-income tenant whose landlord harassed her mercilessly in an effort to force her family out of her building in order to subdivide the apartments and triple the rent; a militant Black nationalist whom the management company tried to evict in retaliation for her organizing activity ... and so forth.

*Before and during this period of work, we identified our central task as the construction of mass organizations around concrete sites of struggle. Through the Struggle Committees Initiative, we proposed the formation of struggle committees composed of tenants and workers. Although our interventions met with varying degrees of success, we failed to advance in the line of Party construction – and this for a fundamental reason: we did not organize the immediate vanguard in the mass movement around a **revolutionary and popular program that concentrates the perspective of the masses in revolt.***

The result? We became experts at accumulating intermediate forces. To accumulate intermediate forces is endlessly to repeat practical experiences of defeat and powerlessness. Persisting in a purely quantitative gathering of such experiences is something other than forging the new by advancing the process of constructing the Party: the vanguard detachment of the working class and leading core of the whole people.

This essay is an effort to submit our experiences organizing struggle committees to a rational synthesis. Only such a synthesis can allow us to achieve a qualitative leap in the form of directives that can be applied and tested in the mass movement.

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Maoists must organize the masses by relating to their correct ideas, wherever they are found, including in the daily struggle. However, principles, line, and program – the decisive proletarian class elements of a revolutionary politics – can only be constructed on the basis of correct ideas that emerge from **mass rebellions**. By ‘rebellion,’ we mean an independent, subjectively-absolute exercise of popular force against the class enemy, and not necessarily an insurrection or uprising.¹

¹ We say ‘subjectively’ because, of course, the power of the masses in struggle always remains objectively circumscribed prior to the revolutionary overthrow of the enemy class holding state power.

Mass ideas appear in the form of perceptual knowledge. The role of the proletarian class organization (the Party or pre-Party formation) is to transform perceptual material into comprehensive knowledge and formulate principles, line, and program on that basis – in this way linking scientific knowledge with force and politics.

Why does the revolutionary process essentially depend on correct political ideas that emerge in mass rebellions?

In order to address this question systematically, we must first grasp the fundamentals of the **dialectical materialist theory of knowledge**. We can then take up the question of the **class struggle** in order to characterize what Marxist-Leninist-Maoists mean by **politics**. Finally, we will discuss **practical consequences** for the current step in the process of social revolution.

I. THE DIALECTICAL MATERIALIST THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

The Line of Knowledge of Dialectical Materialism

Broadly speaking, ideas are any reflection of the external world in thought. Everything that is opposed to matter – thought, spirit, consciousness, etc. – participates in the order of ideas, understood in this general sense.

Idealism proceeds from ideas to things, regarding the essence of the world as spiritual. Idealism divides into two. **Objective idealism** holds that the world is the expression of an objective world spirit that is independent of matter and prior to it: destiny, God, nature, reason, etc. **Subjective idealism** holds that the world is the product of the subjective consciousness of individuals. In *Where Do Correct Ideas Come From?*, Mao writes:

*Where do correct ideas come from? Do they drop from the skies? No. Are they innate in the mind? No.*²

For objective idealists like Plato and Hegel, knowledge **drops from the skies**. Objective idealists hold that everything is determined by some absolute spiritual formula, and problems can be easily solved if we grasp that formula. For subjective idealists like Berkeley or Dewey, knowledge is **innate in the mind**, and so everything in the world can be determined by subjective will. For example, pragmatism denies the regularity inherent in objective things, holding that the world is dominated by blind contingency. For pragmatists, scientific laws are nothing more than useful assumptions that serve temporary subjective interests.

The fundamental premise of the **materialist** theory of knowledge is affirmation of the objective reality of the material world, that is, the independence of the content of knowledge from consciousness. Materialism proceeds from things to sensations and then to ideas. Ideas have matter as their source, and they reflect the material world with varying degrees of correctness. Materialism holds that being is principal in relation to thought.

All materialisms hold that the world is essentially material and that knowledge reflects the material world. How, then, do we distinguish dialectical materialism from pre-Marxist metaphysical materialism?

We can approach this question by way of what Engels called “the great fundamental question”³ of philosophy, namely, the question of the relation between thought and being. The fundamental question of philosophy

² Mao, *Where Do Correct Ideas Come From?*, May 1963,

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-9/mswv9_01.htm>.

³ “The great fundamental question of all, especially newer, philosophy is that of the relation between thought and being.” Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach und der Ausgang der klassischen deutschen Philosophie* [Ludwig

divides into (1) the question of the identity of thought and being; (2) the question of the primacy of thought over being or being over thought.

Those who uphold the identity of thought and being affirm that the world is knowable, drawing a line of demarcation with agnosticism. Consequential idealists and all materialists recognize the identity of thought and being. The question then becomes: which aspect grounds the identity? For idealists, thought is the basis of the identity, while materialists hold that being is principal and thought is secondary.

Produced on the basis of the scientific progress that accompanied the rise of capitalism in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries, **metaphysical materialism** affirms the indivisibly **material** character of the world. At the same time, it is **metaphysical**: it grasps the material world as static and its reflection in thought as passive. For metaphysical materialism, consciousness is like a mirror that reflects the surface of an essentially unchanging world.

On the other hand, **dialectical materialism** affirms that the world constantly develops through its internal contradictions and that the process of knowledge in its turn undergoes an uninterrupted, active process of transformation. Mao says that the dialectical materialist theory of knowledge is a “*dynamic revolutionary reflection theory*” based on practice.⁴

Against metaphysical materialism, dialectical materialism thus upholds the dynamism of both the world and knowledge:

1—**Dynamism of the world.** For metaphysical materialists, matter is essentially static: transformations are limited to changes of position or increases and decreases in quantity. Since there are no substantial changes in matter itself, then either movement originates from a force external to matter (in the manner of objective idealism) or the diversity of matter is itself taken to be a subjective illusion (in the manner of subjective idealism). In both cases, metaphysical materialism concedes important positions to idealism.

For dialectical materialists, movement is the fundamental attribute of matter, and the cause of movement is internal to matter itself. In the course of matter’s own movement, qualitative changes take place in its structure, which results in infinitely diverse forms of matter in motion.

2—**Dynamism of knowledge.** While for idealists and metaphysical materialists, knowledge can be an inspiration that strikes the knower all at once, for dialectical materialists knowledge is a process that necessarily traces a path over time.

Dialectical materialism holds that thought and being form a **unity of opposites** linked via a line of reciprocal conversion between thought and being, knowing and practice, that proceeds on the basis of practice. Knowledge is a process that begins with concrete practice, sums up that practice as abstract theory, and tests that knowledge again in concrete practice. In Lenin’s words:

Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy], 1886, <http://www.mlwerke.de/me/me21/me21_274.htm>. [Our translation.]

⁴ Regarding the 11th of Marx’s theses on Feuerbach (“*The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it*”), Mao writes: “*This is the first scientific law to correctly solve the problem of consciousness and existence from the beginning of human history, and this is the basic point of view of the dynamic revolutionary reflection theory which Lenin profoundly developed later.*” Mao, 新民主主义论 [On New Democracy], January 1940, <<https://www.marxists.org/chinese/maozedong/marxist.org-chinese-mao-194001.htm>>. [Our translation.]

*Thought proceeding from the concrete to the abstract – provided it is **correct** (NB) (and Kant, like all philosophers, speaks of correct thought) – does not get away from the truth but comes closer to it. The abstraction of matter, of a **law** of nature, the abstraction of **value**, etc., in short **all** scientific (correct, serious, not absurd) abstractions reflect nature more deeply, truly, and **completely**. From living perception to abstract thought, **and from this to practice**, – such is the dialectical path of the cognition of **truth**, of the cognition of objective reality.⁵*

The line of knowledge of dialectical materialism is thus the line of **practice–theory–practice**. Mao divides this path into two successive leaps: an initial leap from practice to theory, and a subsequent leap from theory to practice.

The First Leap: From Practice to Theory

The long-term social practice of transforming the world has demonstrated that the objective world does not depend on subjective consciousness, but rather that the world develops according to its own inherent laws. In both the struggle with nature and the class struggle, we must first study the nature and regularity of objective things themselves before we can use such laws to transform the world through practice.

What do Marxists mean by practice? Do we mean actions in accordance with a certain higher law, as with religious practice? No. Do we mean isolated individual activity, as the bourgeoisie often means when it uses the concept of ‘practice’? No.

As Marx had already pointed out in his *Theses on Feuerbach*, by ‘practice’ we mean **revolutionary** and **social** practice.

*The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as **revolutionary practice**. [...] All social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.⁶*

Revolutionary Practice

Our practice must first of all be **revolutionary**. Systematic knowledge of society and nature can only come about through practice that transforms society and the world in a revolutionary manner. It is only on the basis of direct or indirect participation in revolutionary practice that we can obtain scientific knowledge (the first leap) that can then be grasped by the masses so as to become a material force that transforms the world (second leap).

In *On Practice* and later texts, Mao identifies the three revolutionary practices that give rise to correct ideas: the struggle for production, the class struggle, and scientific experimentation. The three revolutionary practices produce raw perceptual materials that can then be systematized as rational knowledge.

⁵ Lenin, *Conspectus of Hegel’s Science of Logic*, September-December 1914, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1914/cons-logic/ch03.htm>>.

⁶ Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, Spring 1845, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>>.

1—The **struggle for production** is the most fundamental practice, and includes both the struggle between man and nature (the labor process) and relations of production. The aim of the struggle for production is to revolutionize nature.

2—The **class struggle** develops from the social aspect of the struggle for production, that is, relations of production, but also includes the ideological and political class struggles. The aim of the class struggle is to revolutionize society.

3— **Scientific experimentation** includes experiments in the struggle for production and the class struggle, as well as laboratory experiments in the natural sciences. Here ‘experimentation’ refers to a particular practice that produces perceptual material, and not the completed sciences themselves, which are the summation of perceptual material that emerges from the three revolutionary social practices. The aim of scientific experimentation is to revolutionize thought.

In the mass movement, the three practical sources of knowledge are complexly articulated with one another. For example, the Stakhanovist movement in the USSR represented not simply an intensification of the struggle for production, but also a fierce class struggle against bourgeois ‘experts,’ the social division of labor, and the reproduction of bourgeois relations of production. The problem addressed by Stakhanovism turned on the division between manual and intellectual labor: should the bourgeoisie lead the scientific process? Or should that process be led by the proletariat, the only class that can organize science so that it directly serves the struggle for production in order to meet social needs?

While the first two sources of correct knowledge are principally mass practices, scientific experimentation is generally taken up either (1) by scientists or Party members in capitalist society, or (2) the masses under Party leadership during the socialist transition.

Scientific Experimentation by Scientists or Party Members in Capitalist Society

Under capitalism, the working class is deprived of the minimal necessary conditions to carry out scientific experiments, which are therefore left to intellectuals. However, the manual/intellectual division of labor not only means that the average worker is deprived of knowledge, but also that intellectuals are generally antagonistic to the proletariat. Even if particular intellectuals uphold Marxism on paper, they will generally display individualism and aversion to discipline in practice. In the words of Kautsky (before he became a revisionist):

As an isolated individual, the proletarian is nothing. His whole strength, his whole progress, all his hopes and expectations are derived from organization, from systematic action in conjunction with his fellows. [...]

Quite different is the case of the intellectual. He does not fight by means of power, but by argument. His weapons are his personal knowledge, his personal ability, his personal convictions. He can attain to any position at all only through his personal qualities. Hence the freest play for his individuality seems to him the prime condition for successful activity. It is only with difficulty that he submits to being a part subordinate to a whole, and then only from necessity, not from inclination. He recognizes the need of discipline only for the mass, not for the elect minds. And of course he counts himself among the latter....⁷

⁷ Karl Kautsky, *The Intellectuals and the Workers*, 1903, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1903/xx/int-work.htm>>.

In the process of social revolution, by ‘intellectuals’ we therefore mean either workers who have raised their level of education and taken up Marxism, or petty-bourgeois/bourgeois intellectuals who have taken up Marxism and linked themselves, directly or indirectly, with the struggle for production and the class struggle. ‘Intellectual’ is a dialectical unity that links the two aspects of the manual labor/intellectual labor contradiction. An intellectual in the Marxist sense can only be a **proletarian intellectual**, that is, an intellectual who bears the class project of the proletariat and participates in its struggles. Mao writes:

*The reason why Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin could work out their theories was mainly that they personally took part in the practice of the class struggle and the scientific experimentation of their time.*⁸

Scientific Experimentation by the Masses Under Party Leadership During the Socialist Transition

In early 1964, Mao put forward two slogans: “in industry, learn from Taching,” and “in agriculture, learn from Tachai.” The cases of the Taching oil-field complex and the production brigade of Tachai provide examples of **the masses participating in scientific experimentation under Party leadership**. As with Stakhanovism, the cases of Tachai and Taching complexly articulated the three practices of the struggle for production, the class struggle, and scientific experiment.

—**Tachai** was a production brigade of the Tachai People’s Commune led by the county Party committee, located in an area of Shansi Province that had historically proved difficult for agriculture. The Tachai brigade strictly practiced self-reliance, refusing all state help even during drought years, and promoted a system of collective evaluation founded on a unified work-point standard. This resulted in tremendous gains in **productivity**. For example, the production brigade raised grain output from .75 tons per hectare to 7.5 tons. Productivity increases were not subordinated to accumulation, as is the case under capitalism, but resulted from the enthusiasm and creativeness of the direct producers. The peasant masses under Party leadership innovated over 200 new types of farm machines in the course of developing the commune. Tachai thus represented an advance in the **class struggle**, as the increase in productivity was a direct consequence of transformed relations of production. At Tachai, the poor and lower-middle peasants exercised supervision over cadres, participated in management and administration, and struggled against capitalist relations of production.

—**Taching** was an oil-field built by workers beginning in 1960. Taching adopted the revolutionary Anshan Iron and Steel Mill charter, which instituted worker participation in management and regular cadre participation in productive labor, allowing the workers to advance the **class struggle** in their interest. At Taching, **productivity increases** were staggering, with crude output increasing at an average annual rate of 28%. In order to raise productivity, workers – together with scientists and engineers – relied on their own efforts to innovate the production tools, as they did at Tachai.

Taching and Tachai are what the CCP called **typical experiments**, where ‘typical’ means that they were types or models to be taken up and implemented across China. The process of popularizing scientific experiments was essential in the transition to a communist society. In Mao’s words:

Popularize experimental fields. This is a very important method of leadership. In this way the style of our party’s leadership in the field of economy will rapidly change. In the country, the experimental

⁸ Mao, *On Practice*, July 1937, < https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_16.htm>.

*fields are important; in the cities it is the advanced factories, mines, machine-tool shops, work sites, or work sections. A break-through at one point may induce the rest [of the entire system] to move.*⁹

Such ‘typical experiments’ were not simply examples for other factories to follow, but were decisive in broader efforts to reduce, and eventually eliminate, the gap between intellectual and manual labor. An article written by a middle school revolutionary committee explains:

*Linking factory with school means letting teachers and students go periodically to factories to learn about industry. In order to grasp typical experiments, we send students from one class to a factory.*¹⁰

Since Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done?*, it has been part of the ABCs of Marxism that the spontaneous worker movement is incapable of giving rise to scientific socialism solely by its own efforts. Even during the socialist transition, a relative separation of the masses from scientific knowledge persists, although it will be progressively decreased until it is eventually eliminated with the achievement of full communism. This is why Mao does not include scientific experimentation under the category of “*the practice of the masses*”:

*Thoughts, views, plans and methods are a mere reflection of the objective world and the raw materials and half-digested facts come from **the practice of the masses or his own scientific experiments.***¹¹

The increasing participation of the masses in scientific experimentation is necessary during the period of socialism so that the gap between manual and intellectual labor is extinguished with the arrival of communism. The transition to communism means that knowledge itself – which for millennia was a **class** affair – must step by step become a **mass** affair. One of the tasks of socialism is to organize the progressive elimination of the very categories of cadre and scientist.

Socialist enterprises rely on the mass of workers to participate actively not only in managing production and eliminating capitalist relations of production, but also in scientific experimentation.

Nature, Society, Thought

The complex articulation of the three revolutionary practices with each another constitutes the dialectic between nature, society, and thought. The struggle for production aims to transform nature, the class struggle aims to transform society, and scientific experimentation aims to transform thought.

Dialectical materialism holds that, broadly speaking, society and thought form part of nature, which is why Lenin speaks of “*nature (including mind and society).*”¹² Marxists affirm materialist monism, i.e., the identity of thought and being under the law of being. Society and consciousness emerge as distinct realities at determined stages in the development of matter. Matter develops from the inorganic to the organic, from the senseless to the sensory, from the unconscious to the conscious.

⁹ Mao, *Sixty Points On Working Methods – A Draft Resolution From The Office Of The Centre Of The CPC*, February 2, 1958, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-8/mswv8_05.htm>.

¹⁰ Tientsin No. 42 Middle School Revolutionary Committee, *How Did We Initiate ‘Industrial Studies’ Activities?*, July 21, 1970, in Peter J. Seybolt, ed., *Revolutionary Education in China: Documents and Commentary* (Routledge, January 2018).

¹¹ Mao, *Sixty Points On Working Methods*. [Our emphasis.]

¹² Lenin, *On the Question of Dialectics*, 1915, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1915/misc/x02.htm>>.

The process of matter gives rise to successively higher forms of motion, of which the basic forms are four in number (from lower to higher): physical, chemical, biological, and social. It is the task of science concretely to investigate the specific forms of material movement in order to reveal their inner laws. Higher and more complex forms contain lower forms of motion, and each basic form of motion contains more specific forms. But higher forms of motion have their own particular nature and laws, and they are irreducible to lower forms of motion. It is characteristic of metaphysical materialism to use lower forms of motion immediately to explain higher forms. For example, many bourgeois materialists directly use competition in nature – which is particular to the biological form of motion – in order to explain competition in class society.¹³

The organic world appeared as a result of a long period of development of the physical world. Inorganic bodies became organic bodies, and matter undertook a qualitative leap: living beings acquired the capacity to react to stimulation, allowing them to adapt to external conditions. A second leap occurred with the appearance of the human brain, which had the capacity to synthesize perceptual materials and express abstract ideas. Consciousness is thus the product of matter that has reached a certain stage. The function of consciousness is to reflect the existence of objective things in a subjective form.

However, while consciousness appeared due to the physiological development of a higher nervous system, this physiological development was itself mediated by human labor, that is, by **social** productive activity that **consciously** aims to modify nature towards a goal. As Marx points out, consciousness is a distinguishing feature of human labor:

What distinguishes the worst master-builder from the best bee is that he has built the cell in his head before he builds it in wax.”¹⁴

However, as both Marx and Engels explain, the social character of human labor precedes its conscious character: “*consciousness is, therefore, from the very beginning a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all.*”¹⁵ Labor pushed society to develop, which in turn led to the development of language and human consciousness:

*The development of labor necessarily helped to bring the members of society closer together by increasing cases of mutual support and joint activity, and by making clear the advantage of this joint activity to each individual. In short, men in the making arrived at the point **where they had something to say to each other.**¹⁶*

The motor of the emergence of consciousness is thus **human social labor**. Thought is actively acquired and developed only after human society emerges from nature through the mediation of labor.

The ordering of Mao’s three sources of knowledge is therefore not arbitrary: nature is principal in relation to

¹³ Of course, this does not mean that biological phenomena do not reappear in society in a higher form. The point is simply that the higher form has its own laws of motion. Indeed, Engels writes that capitalist competition “*is the Darwinian struggle for individual existence, transferred from nature to society with potentiated fury. The natural standpoint of animals appears as the culmination-point of human development.*” Engels, *Die Entwicklung des Sozialismus*.

¹⁴ Marx, *Das Kapital* [Capital], 1867, < http://www.mlwerke.de/me/me23/me23_192.htm#Kap_5_1 >. [Our translation.]

¹⁵ Marx and Engels, *German Ideology*, 1845-1846, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm> >.

¹⁶ Engels, *The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man*, May-June 1876, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1876/part-played-labour/> >.

society, and both nature and society are principal in relation to thought. The development of the human/nature dialectic – the labor process – accelerates the development of social relations at all levels, and consciousness reflects the development of both the contradiction between humans and nature (resolved via labor) and social contradictions – which, in class society, are principally contradictions between classes (resolved via the class struggle).

Social Practice

The three practices that produce knowledge are not only revolutionary, but social. This has as a consequence that the truth is historical, since particular types of societies only emerge at determined moments in history.

The fact that the source of knowledge is social practice also means that the source of correct ideas about nature and society is not the isolated activity of individuals, but the practical experience of the working masses in revolutionizing nature and society. The **line of knowledge of dialectical materialism**, practice-theory-practice, cannot therefore be separated from the **mass line**. The first leap from practice to theory raises revolutionary mass activity to the stage of consciousness. Ai Siqi characterizes the mass line as follows:

*First the masses rise up. Then the Central Committee sums up experience and formulates a directive, which belongs to thought. Then the directive is carried out and becomes material.*¹⁷

Only the revolutionary practice of the broad masses of people in their millions can provide the abundance of perceptual material that can be concentrated and systematized into rational thought.

The Party can at best offer rough approximations outside the mass movement. Mao did not develop his rural strategy by abstractly contemplating Chinese society, but by summing up the peasant rebellions of 1924-27. This series of rebellions allowed Mao to correct the previous failed strategy of organizing worker insurrections in the cities. The perceptual knowledge of the masses is essential to the production of rational knowledge, and thus to the formulation of a correct political line. As Ai Siqi writes, it is by relying on the masses that the Party avoids subjectivism, i.e., idealism in practical work:

*The most abundant source of perceptual knowledge is the practical experience of the masses. The phenomena observed by millions of people's eyes are always more abundant than what any intelligent and outstanding individual observes in isolation. Therefore, anyone who wants to conduct a thorough investigation of things, to obtain rich perceptual knowledge materials as a basis for raising awareness to the rational stage, must contact the masses and expand the narrow vision of the individual's eyes through the eyes of the masses. In order to do a good job in their leadership and scientific research, leaders of all revolutionary practical work and scientific researchers must be good at listening to the voices of the people in practice, and pay particular attention to new inventions made in their practical struggle during the period of high revolutionary mood of the masses.*¹⁸

¹⁷ Ai Siqi, “略谈毛泽东的《人的正确思想是从哪里来的?》一文对认识论学说的新发展” [“On New Developments in Epistemology in Mao Tse-tung's *Where Do Correct Ideas Come From?*”], July 1963, in Ai Siqi, 艾思奇哲学文选 [*Ai Siqi: Philosophical Selections*], Vol. 5 (经济科学出版社, 2016), 173. [Our translation.]

¹⁸ Ai Siqi, “辩证唯物主义讲课提纲” [“Outline of Lectures on Dialectical Materialism”], 1956, in Ai Siqi, 艾思奇文集 [*Ai Siqi: Collected Works*], Vol. 2 (人民出版社, 1980), 525. [Our translation.]

In sum: for Marxist-Leninist-Maoists, practice can only be **revolutionary social practice**. The practice that produces scientific knowledge is not the practice of individuals alone (it is **social**), nor is it the practice of vacillating intermediate forces (it is **revolutionary**). The fundamental practical actors are the advanced section of the masses, those Mao called “heroes.”

The basis of all scientific knowledge is the revolutionary experience of the advanced section of the masses in production and the class struggle.

Perceptual Knowledge and Rational Knowledge

The first leap from practice to theory is characterized by two integral stages in the process of knowledge: the stage of perceptual knowledge and the stage of rational knowledge. We cannot understand the dialectical materialist line of knowledge without grasping the dialectic between perceptual knowledge and rational knowledge.

Perceptual Knowledge and Empiricism

From the three revolutionary social practices of the struggle for production, the class struggle, and scientific experiment, we obtain some **perceptual knowledge**.¹⁹ Perceptual knowledge is experience that has not yet been summed up. This is not knowledge properly speaking, but a kind of **preliminary understanding** whose content is one-sided (because local), as well as superficial and vivid (because directly-perceived). Perceptual knowledge takes the form of sensations, perceptions, and representations.

Unilaterally holding to perceptual knowledge leads to **empiricism**, a source and form of subjectivism. Empiricists stop the process of knowledge at the perceptual stage, taking partial and raw perceptual material for refined and comprehensive knowledge, thus maintaining the gap between the subjective and the objective. Empiricists can be either **subjective idealists**, who generalize anomalous experiences that do not reflect the objective trend in order to serve particular interests, or **localists**, who generalize experiences that concretely reflect the objective struggle but which are inadequate because they are limited and partial.

Rational Knowledge and Dogmatism

How do we reach the advanced stage of rational knowledge from the first stage of perceptual knowledge? The method of transformation is indicated by Mao’s famous ‘sixteen characters’:

*... discarding the dross and selecting the essential, eliminating the false and retaining the true, proceeding from the one to the other and from the outside to the inside.*²⁰

This method is the concentration and systematization of perceptual material. The systematization involves five elements:

¹⁹ Of course, in reality there is no pure perceptual knowledge. The distinction between perceptual and rational knowledge is a **relative distinction** that we make in order to clarify the moments of the dialectical materialist line of knowledge.

²⁰ Mao, *On Practice*.

- 1—**comparison**, the simplest and most basic method, in which we discover the similarities and differences between things;
- 2—**analysis**, in which we study each part separately;
- 3—**synthesis**, in which we relate the different parts that we have analyzed to one another;
- 4—**abstraction**, in which we put aside non-essential things, extracting what is most fundamental and typical;
- 5—**generalization**, in which we proceed from essential particular experiences to generalities that embrace an abundance of phenomena.

Rational knowledge thus represents a rearrangement and transformation of surface material that allows us to lay hold of the essence of things. The characteristic forms of rational knowledge are concepts, judgments, and reasoning.

Rational knowledge is in no way a simple accumulation of perceptual material. That rational knowledge is the result of the elimination of perceptual material means that it **appears** to be more abstract than perceptual knowledge, but its content is more comprehensive and profound, and so **rational knowledge is in its essence concrete and dynamic**, while perceptual knowledge is in its essence abstract and static.

Science is concrete and dynamic because the objective world reflected in thought is concrete and dynamic.

Lenin wrote that “*one of the basic principles of dialectics is that there is no such thing as abstract truth, truth is always concrete.*”²¹ The particularities of the external world are reflected in thought and become the **concrete character of truth**, which in class society principally resides in its class content. Marx writes:

*The concrete is concrete because it is the summation of many determinations, thus the unity of the manifold. It therefore appears in thought as the process of summation, as a result, not as a starting-point.*²²

Even universal laws like ‘one divides into two’ are concrete, since their universality is the summation of many particularities, and in reality such laws only exist in concrete things. Science or rational knowledge, including Marxism itself, is experience that has been concretely summed up. In particular, rational knowledge is a concrete summation of concrete materials produced by the three revolutionary movements of the struggle for production, the class struggle, and scientific experiment.

The **dynamic character of truth** proceeds from the dialectical thesis that all reality is a process. The nature of a given process is determined by the principal contradiction and principal aspect of the principal contradiction. But the principal contradiction and principal aspect constantly change, which in turn transforms the ideas that reflect the real movement. Both practice and knowledge have a determined historicity. Each concrete truth reflects a determined historical period. For example, Marx’s conception of the Party was correct in the era of rising capitalism, but it is no longer correct in the era of imperialism and proletarian revolution.

It is only by following the dialectical materialist line of knowledge that we are able to lay hold of the dynamic character of truth. Unilaterally holding to the stage of rational knowledge leads to **dogmatism**, which – like empiricism – is a source and form of subjectivism. Dogmatism makes the opposite error of empiricism, stopping at a certain point in rational knowledge without absorbing new experience. Lenin could not have led the Russian revolution if he stopped the process of knowledge with Marx’s summation of the Paris Commune in

²¹ Lenin, *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*, February-May 1904, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1904/onestep/r.htm>>.

²² Marx, *Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, August-September 1857, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/appx1.htm>>. [Our emphasis.]

The Civil War in France. Dogmatists isolate knowledge from the mass ideas generated by current revolutionary social practice.

We should not make the error of equating dogmatism with “left”-opportunism. For example, Menshevism was a right-opportunist trend, but it dogmatically upheld the old doctrine that the bourgeois-democratic revolution can only be led by the bourgeoisie, opposing the Leninist principle that, in the epoch of imperialism, the bourgeois revolution can only be led by the proletariat.

Finally, we should also guard against abstractly setting empiricism against dogmatism. Empiricism can in fact **serve dogmatism** by using temporary and individual experiences to prove a doctrine separated from the current objective trend.

Rational Knowledge and the Three Revolutionary Practices

Science divides into the natural sciences and social science according to its practical source. The natural sciences ultimately depend on the struggle for production and social science ultimately depends on the class struggle.

The **natural sciences** are grounded in the revolutionary transformation of nature by the masses through their productive activity. The level of productive forces, which measures our capacity to transform nature, is directly linked to our understanding of nature. The stage in the development of production determines the level of knowledge of nature.

All classes can master the natural sciences in principle, although in class societies, the direct producers are effectively deprived of the means of achieving such mastery. In class society, the class orientation of the natural sciences comes down mainly to its **use**. Generally, it is only the progressive classes that can lay hold of the material needs of social life and deploy science in order to meet them.

Social science is a summation of the revolutionary transformation of society by the broad masses through the class struggle. Unlike the natural sciences, not all classes can master social science in principle, and indeed, the bourgeoisie today generally denies the very possibility of such a science – thus marking off part of matter as essentially unknowable.

The revolutionary class always understands society more correctly than the reactionary, decaying classes.²³ For example, the rising bourgeoisie had a firmer grasp of social laws than did the declining aristocracy. Decadent forces cannot correctly reflect the law of social development or material needs of social life in thought. While reactionaries can grasp specific practical issues in order to reinforce their domination or arrest their decline, they cannot comprehensively reflect the objective laws of social development.

Prior to capitalism, the exploiting classes alone had knowledge of society, but it was partial, scattered, and therefore non-scientific. Only with the emergence of the proletariat in developed capitalist society did systematic knowledge of society become possible.

²³ We should not confuse ‘revolutionary class’ with ‘direct producers.’ The revolutionary class is a class bearing a state project that leads an alliance of classes in the destruction of the decadent society. Before the constitution of the proletariat as a class for-itself, all revolutionary classes were exploiting classes.

Marxist philosophy, or dialectical materialism, is founded on both productive activity and the class struggle. It is at once a summation of the experience of the proletariat in its struggle with the bourgeoisie and a summation of the development of the natural sciences.

Ever since class society came into being the world has had only two kinds of knowledge, knowledge of the struggle for production and knowledge of the class struggle. Natural science and social science are the crystallization of these two kinds of knowledge, and philosophy is the generalization and summation of the knowledge of nature and the knowledge of society. Is there any other kind of knowledge? No.²⁴

Incorrect Systematizations

What do we make of systematized ‘knowledge’ that does not reflect objective reality?

Incorrect systematizations represent a failure to make the qualitative leap to rational knowledge. Rational knowledge **is in its essence** relatively correct. If we are bad at transforming perceptual impressions into rational understanding, then even though our analysis may have the **verbal form** of rational knowledge, it will lack **conceptual content**, which means that it will not generally reflect the essence and whole of things and the internal relations between things.

As Ai Siqu explains, incorrect systematizations essentially remain at the perceptual stage, despite their outward form:

The objective and real content reflected under its verbal label is deeper and more comprehensive than perceptual knowledge. We cannot regard words as mainly words [...]

If you cannot work on the transformation of the perceptual materials, you will maintain knowledge at the stage of sensory experience, and it will be impossible to grasp the essence and main thread in the factual materials. If we cannot grasp the correct concept of things, we will not avoid the mistakes of empiricism.²⁵

Marx makes this same point in *Capital* when he distinguishes between the classical economists, who were able to penetrate the appearances of phenomena and disclose their essences, and the vulgar economists, who systematized appearances in the passive manner of stenographers:

By classical political economy I mean all the economists who, since the time of W. Petty, have investigated the real inner connections of bourgeois production-relations, as opposed to vulgar-economics, which drifts only in the apparent connection, ceaselessly chewing on the materials long since provided by scientific economics, in order to lend plausibility to the coarsest phenomena for bourgeois household requirements. Apart from this, the vulgar economists confine themselves to systematizing in a pedantic way, and proclaiming as eternal truths, the banal and self-satisfied representations held by the bourgeois production-agents about their own world, which to them is the best possible one.²⁶

²⁴ Mao, *Rectify the Party's Style of Work*, February 1, 1942,

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_06.htm>.

²⁵ Ai Siqu, *Ibid.*, 521.

²⁶ Marx, *Das Kapital*, Chapter 4.

The Second Leap: From Theory to Practice

The second leap back to practice is more important than the first leap to knowledge, for two reasons: (1) it is only in revolutionary social practice that thought proves its correctness or incorrectness; (2) in Mao's words, "*the one and only purpose of the proletariat in knowing the world is to change it.*"²⁷

(1) Mao: "Only Social Practice Can Be the Criterion of Truth."²⁸

The practical application of theory is more accurate than theory itself, which cannot be self-verifying.

Against non-Marxist schools of thought that posit criteria of truth that are **subjective** – for example, the Cartesian principle of clarity and distinctness – dialectical materialism holds that the sole criterion of truth is revolutionary social practice. Marx insisted that "*man must prove the truth – i.e., the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking – in practice.*"²⁹

(2) Marx: "Theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses."³⁰

The principal reason that the second leap is more important than the first is that knowledge only exists to serve the revolutionary process. The application of theory to practice introduces the universality of theory into the movement of material reality. Thus, Lenin: "**Practice is higher than (theoretical) knowledge, for it has not only the dignity of universality, but also of immediate actuality.**"³¹

If subjective consciousness correctly reflects the essence and laws of nature and society, its application can accelerate the struggle to transform the world. When the Party formulates rational knowledge in directives that are then applied in practice, the results of practice allow us to test the directives. The masses can then carry forward their achievements and correct their shortcomings, dividing one into two.

The Party brings the masses step by step to mastery of knowledge that reflects the laws of social development, which includes both the development of productive forces and the class struggle. In mastering such knowledge, the masses transform it into a weapon. The masses are thus not only the primary source of knowledge, but also the **principal force that transforms society and nature**. The masses at once make history and progressively liberate humanity from domination by nature.

Art and Literature as Knowledge

The second leap applies to art and literature no less than it does to Party directives. For Marxists, the aim of art and literature is not simply to provide subjective pleasure, but to transform thought. Like other forms of knowledge, proletarian art and literature transform perceptual material that emerges from the advanced among the masses. In particular, art and literature transform such material into **typical images** that – like typical

²⁷ Mao, *Where Do Correct Ideas Come From?*.

²⁸ Mao, *On Practice*.

²⁹ Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*.

³⁰ Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, December 1843 – January 1844, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>>.

³¹ Lenin, *Conspectus of Hegel's Science of Logic*.

experiments in the struggle for production and the class struggle – transform thought in the service of changing society and the world.³² In his *Talks at the Yen-an Forum on Literature and Art*, Mao explains:

*Although man's social life is the only source of literature and art and is incomparably livelier and richer in content, the people are not satisfied with life alone and demand literature and art as well. Why? Because, while both are beautiful, life as reflected in works of literature and art can and ought to be on a higher plane, more intense, more concentrated, more **typical**, nearer the ideal, and therefore more universal than actual everyday life. Revolutionary literature and art should create a variety of characters out of real life and help the masses to propel history forward.*³³

The ‘second leap’ for art and literature is ideological transformation, and thus art and literature belong to the proletarian ideological class struggle, which in turn serves the revolutionary process. Art and literature must participate in transforming the ideology of the masses so they can in turn consciously transform society and nature.

The General Law of Knowledge

Correctness is thus measured by effective revolutionary transformation. But this is a protracted process, involving **continuous repetition** of the sequence practice–theory–practice. Knowledge is accumulated in an upward, spiraling sequence over time. This is the **General Law of Knowledge**, put forward by Mao in *On Practice*:

*Practice, knowledge, again practice, and again knowledge. This form repeats itself in endless cycles, and with each cycle the content of practice and knowledge rises to a higher level.*³⁴

In *Where Do Correct Ideas Come From?*, Mao supplements the General Law of Knowledge formulated in *On Practice* by pointing out that the path of knowledge can have a **relative end**:

*Correct knowledge can be arrived at only after many repetitions of the process leading from matter to consciousness and then back to matter.*³⁵

The subjective and the objective can never fully coincide. Arrival at correct knowledge means that subjective understanding is brought closer and closer to objective reality through a process of repetition that proceeds from the one-sided to the comprehensive and from the surface to the essence. Conversely, to make errors is to fall into subjectivism, which means an increasing relative separation of the subjective from the objective.

For dialectical materialism, correctness is at once **relative truth** and **absolute truth**.³⁶

—**Relative truth** refers to the fact that knowledge reflects the objective world in a conditioned and incomplete manner – in Lenin’s phrase, “*the endless process of the deepening of man’s knowledge of the thing.*”³⁷ Both the

³² Regarding typical experiments, see the discussion of Taching and Tachai, above.

³³ Mao, *Talks at the Yen-an Forum on Literature and Art*, May 1942, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_08.htm>. [Our emphasis.]

³⁴ Mao, *On Practice*.

³⁵ Mao, *Where Do Correct Ideas Come From?*.

³⁶ See Chapter 5 of Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, February-October 1908, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1908/mec/two5.htm>>.

³⁷ Ibid.

world and knowledge of it are in a constant process of development, and in all concrete conditions, knowledge confronts given limits. Relative truth may be limited by **historical** conditions, e.g., Marx could not have discovered the Leninist Party of a new type in the 19th century, because the social conditions for its emergence did not yet exist. Or relative truth may be limited by **natural** conditions, e.g., the law of gravity is universal given the physical properties of certain planets, which do not exist everywhere in the universe.

—**Absolute truth** refers to the fact that the content of knowledge reflects the objective world completely and in an unconditioned manner. Lenin calls this “*the objectivity of consideration (not examples, not divergences, but the Thing-in-itself)*.”³⁸ Dialectical materialism holds that knowledge can comprehensively and systematically reflect social and natural development at a given moment in time or under given conditions, and in this sense every truth has an absolute side.

However, properly speaking, absolute truth refers to the process of knowledge taken as a whole, across temporal and other concrete conditions. In Mao’s words:

*Marxists recognize that in the absolute and general process of development of the universe, the development of each particular process is relative, and that hence, in the endless flow of absolute truth, man’s knowledge of a particular process at any given stage of development is only relative truth. The sum total of innumerable relative truths constitutes absolute truth.*³⁹

The dialectic of relative and absolute truth thus proceeds from the principle that, from the perspective of the whole of the process of knowledge, each particular truth has a relative character. Relative truths relate to absolute truth as parts to the whole. Absolute truth as such only exists as the infinite sum of relative truths. However, each relative truth is also a precise reflection of a certain aspect or process of the objective world, and in this sense bears an absolute character.

Metaphysics unilaterally privileges either the relative character of truth (e.g., postmodernism), or its absolute character (e.g., bourgeois positivism), while dialectical materialism holds that they form a **dialectical unity**.

II. THE CLASS STRUGGLE

The class struggle, the principal source of correct ideas about society, expresses the irreconcilable nature of the fundamental interests of enemy classes. The class struggle itself divides into the economic, ideological, and political class struggles. Which of these struggles is principal regarding the determination of correct ideas about society?

The ideological class struggle is the local and immediate source of correct ideas: new and true ideas only emerge in struggle against old and false ideas. Marxist dialectics holds that contradiction is the motive force in the development of things, and it is through ideological struggle we can vanquish erroneous ideas. Mao: “*What is correct invariably develops in the course of struggle with what is wrong.*”⁴⁰

³⁸ Lenin, *Philosophical Notebooks*, 1914, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1914/cons-logic/summary.htm>>.

³⁹ Mao, *On Practice*.

⁴⁰ Mao, *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People*, February 1957, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-5/mswv5_58.htm>.

However, as materialists, we know that the motor of thought is not internal to thought, but must be referred to reality. **False consciousness** refers precisely to misrecognizing the source of thought in thought itself, failing to understand that the ideological struggle itself only reflects the process of historical development.⁴¹

What, then, is the motor of historical development – the economic class struggle? Or the political class struggle?

Fundamental Contradiction, Principal Contradiction

The answer is: **both**. Marx divides the motor of historical development between the economic class struggle (the basic or fundamental contradiction that in the final analysis determines the other contradictions) and the political class struggle (the principal contradiction, the contradiction through which the whole can be transformed).⁴²

—The **fundamental contradiction** is the contradiction between productive forces and relations of production, specified under capitalism as the contradiction between the social character of production and the private character of appropriation. Engels writes:

*The social product is appropriated by the individual capitalist. The fundamental contradiction [Grundwiderspruch] from which emerges all the contradictions in which present-day society and which large-scale industry openly displays.*⁴³

—As the fundamental contradiction grows sharper, it determines a series of contradictions in the ideological and political superstructure, including the **principal contradiction** in capitalist societies: the political struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, understood not as social classes but as classes in the political sense, classes bearing a **state project**. Engels explains how the proletarian state project follows from the fundamental contradiction:

*Proletarian revolution, resolution of contradictions: the proletariat seizes public authority, and through this authority transforms the social means of production, slipping out of the hands of the bourgeoisie, into public ownership. Through this act, it liberates the means of production from their previous capital-property and gives their social character full freedom to assert itself.*⁴⁴

⁴¹ In his famous letter to Mehring from 1893, Engels writes: “Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, indeed, but with a false consciousness. The real motives impelling him remain unknown to him, otherwise it would not be an ideological process at all. Hence he imagines false or apparent motives. Because it is a process of thought he derives both its form and its content from pure thought, either his own or that of his predecessors. He works with mere thought material which he accepts without examination as the product of thought, he does not investigate further for a more remote process independent of thought; indeed its origin seems obvious to him, because as all action is produced through the medium of thought it also appears to him to be ultimately based upon thought.” Engels to Franz Mehring, July 14, 1893, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1893/letters/93_07_14.htm>.

⁴² In general terms, the **fundamental contradiction** is the contradiction that is determinant throughout a given process, while the **principal contradiction** is the particular contradiction that is decisive at a given stage of the process.

⁴³ Engels, *Die Entwicklung des Sozialismus von der Utopie zur Wissenschaft* [The Development of Socialism from Utopia to Science], January-March 1880, <http://www.mlwerke.de/me/me19/me19_210.htm>. [Our translation.]

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Lenin elaborates the concept of the principal contradiction through the metaphor of the ‘key link,’ that is, the motive contradiction on which we must concentrate our forces in order to transform the social whole in a revolutionary manner:

*You must be able at each particular moment to find the particular link in the chain which you must grasp with all your might in order to hold the whole chain and to prepare firmly for the transition to the next link; the order of the links, their form, the manner in which they are linked together, the way they differ from each other in the historical chain of events, are not as simple and not as meaningless as those in an ordinary chain made by a smith.*⁴⁵

Productive Forces, Relations of Production

Productive forces are the unity of means of production and direct producers. In general, the **productive forces** are more dynamic and revolutionary than relations of production. Productive forces are **perpetually transformed**, while relations of production are **relatively stable**. However, at any given moment, one or the other will be principal in relation to advancing the revolutionary process. The question of whether forces or relations of production are principal at the economic level is decided by the **political class struggle**.

The Error of the Theory of Productive Forces

Those who hold that it is always and only contradictions internal to productive forces that determine the development of productive forces do not understand that such development cannot proceed on its own, that is, without the intervention of relations of production. Two examples make this point:

1—As a rule, slaves destroy the instruments of labor, while serfs cherish their primitive tools. The antagonistic relation between slaves and their tools was a key factor in the transition to feudalism. However this example tells us that the contradiction between direct producers and the tools they use changes with relations of production, that is, what appears to be a contradiction internal to productive forces between its two factors is in fact **the productive forces demanding a change in relations of production**.

2—The tools appropriate for individual economy in pre-liberation China proved to be inadequate for newly-established cooperative agriculture in socialist China, and hence the peasants demanded an improvement in their production tools. Here what appears to be a contradiction internal to productive forces between its two factors is in fact **relations of production urging the development of productive forces**.

These examples demonstrate that **relations of production always intervene** in contradictions that appear to be entirely internal to productive forces. However, one-sidedly generalizing one or the other example will lead to grave errors.

If we one-sidedly generalize the first example, we remain trapped in the **theory of productive forces**, which holds that the development of productive forces (principally the instruments of production) unilaterally determines the course of social development. A line of revisionists from Bernstein to Liu Shao-Chi have upheld this theory. Liu, for example, held that the principal contradiction was between the “advanced socialist system” and “backwards productive forces,” and not between the proletariat and bourgeoisie.

⁴⁵ Lenin, *The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government*, March-April 1918, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/mar/x03.htm>>.

On the other hand, if we one-sidedly generalize the second example, holding that relations of production are always determinant, thus liquidating the question of productive forces, we will fall into the trap of **politicism**, which can take on either a “left”-opportunist (e.g., Lukács) or a revisionist (e.g., Althusser) political form. Why do we characterize those who adhere to unilateral determination of the development of productive forces by relations of production as ‘politicist’?

The Error of Politicism

Relations of production are reflected in the superstructure. Moreover, in class societies, the class that owns the means of production uses the state – and through the state, law and ideology – in order to **reproduce** those relations.

Politicians hold that both social relations of production and the superstructure that reflects and reproduces them are the determinants of social development. For example, the revisionist Althusser effectively negates the fundamental contradiction between productive forces and relations of production and instead makes the motor of social development the contradiction between relations of production and the reproduction of those relations through what he calls “*Ideological State Apparatuses*.”⁴⁶

Those who unilaterally hold that relations of production drive the development of productive forces must reply to the question: when relations of production hinder the development of productive forces, can productivity continue to develop? If so, can we still say that relations of production are the driving force?

Here we must note that the superstructure is not a **mere reflex** of relations of production. In fact, in societies in which the political system is relatively established, the state will have a power that is more or less independent of the relations of production that ground it. The state will do everything possible to reduce the contradiction that defines the economic base without transforming the relations of production that it exists to serve. The state does this by acting directly on the productive forces without the mediation of relations of production.

For example, recurrent economic crises in imperialist countries today express parasitic and decaying capitalist relations of production limiting the development of productive forces.

⁴⁶ Althusser thus reverses the Marxist thesis that in general, productive forces are the principal aspect of the contradiction that defines the base: “*in the base, which in the last instance, determines everything that happens in the superstructure – in the base, that is, in the unity productive forces/relations of production – the relations of production are determinant, on the basis of the existing productive forces.*” Or again: “*everything is clearly based on the infrastructure of relations of production [...] The effect produced by the superstructure is simultaneously to ensure the conditions under which this exploitation is carried out (Repressive State Apparatus) and the reproduction of the relations of production, that is, of exploitation (Ideological State Apparatuses).*” Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, tr. G.M. Goshgarian, 2014, 21, 93. [Our emphasis.]

The error of politicism today in the US is particularly common among academics. For example, the Trotskyite so-called “Political Marxists,” in the words of one of its adherents, “*have re-affirmed the centrality of social-property relations with strong rules of reproduction to historical materialism. They reject teleological interpretations of history, where some transhistorical dynamic – the growth of markets or the development of the productive forces – explains the transition from one form of social labor to another.*” Charles Post, *The American Road to Capitalism*, Haymarket Books, 2012, p. 2. [Our emphasis.]

In order to overcome the eruption of more frequent and deeper crises, imperialist states will resort to various measures, including armed adventures abroad. **The state can develop productive forces – albeit relatively slowly – even if relations of production hinder their development, without transforming those relations.**

In fact, relations of production can **only** promote the development of productive forces under the condition that forces and relations of production are in relative harmony.

Politics In Command

Both productive forces determinism and politicism fail to grasp the **dialectical unity** of productive forces and relations of production. However, just as we must not one-sidedly emphasize either productive forces or relations of production, it is also incorrect to view the dialectic productive forces/relations of production as an autonomous economic system that functions in virtue of its proper, ‘natural’ laws, independent of **politics**.

The political class struggle is the terrain on which the principal aspect of the fundamental contradiction between productive forces and relations of production is determined. This is the meaning of the Maoist principle that *“political work is the life-blood of all economic work”*⁴⁷ – the basis of Mao’s directive to always **put politics in command**. What does it mean to **put politics in command**?

We can approach this question by briefly examining the GPCR policy of *“taking firm hold of the revolution and promoting production.”* During the January Storm of 1967, capitalist roaders and those who adhered to the bourgeois reactionary line initially advocated *“taking firm hold of production”* rather than grasping revolution, as the revolutionary rebel workers of Shanghai explained in their “Message to All the Shanghai People”:

*At the beginning of the movement, they used the pretext of “taking firm hold of production” to repress the revolution and oppose taking firm hold of the revolution. When we workers of the revolutionary rebel groups wanted to rise up in revolution and criticize and repudiate the bourgeois reactionary line, they used the tasks of production to bring pressure to bear on the workers and tagged us with the label of “sabotaging production.” Did they really want to “take firm hold of production”? No, they wanted to defend their own positions and attempted to obstruct our revolution. We exposed their schemes and rose up bravely in rebellion.*⁴⁸

After this failure to justify their counterrevolutionary politics using the theory of productive forces, they then turned to politicist arguments and corresponding tactics:

*Then they resorted to another trick, that is, they played with high-sounding revolutionary words, giving the appearance of being exceedingly ‘Left’ in order to incite large numbers of members of the Workers’ Red Militia Detachments whom they have hoodwinked to undermine production and sabotage transport and communications under the pretext of going north to “lodge complaints.”*⁴⁹

The capitalist roaders and those who adhered to the bourgeois reactionary line falsely claimed to take firm hold, first of production, then of revolution. Against this, we must grasp production and revolution as a unity of

⁴⁷ Mao, *Editor’s Notes From “A Socialist Upsurge in China’s Countryside”*, September and December 1955, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-5/mswv5_48.htm>.

⁴⁸ Revolutionary Rebel Workers of Shanghai, *Take Firm Hold of the Revolution, Promote Production and Utterly Smash the New Counter-Attack Launched by the Bourgeois Reactionary Line*, January 13, 1967, <<https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/peking-review/1967/PR1967-03b.htm>>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

opposites.

*Red and expert, politics and business – the relationship between them is the unification of contradictions. We must criticize the apolitical attitude. [We] must oppose empty-headed ‘politicoes’ on the one hand and disoriented ‘practicoes’ on the other.*⁵⁰

It is characteristic of revisionism that it conceives of developing productive forces (expertness) and revolutionizing relations of production (redness) in isolation from each other. In fact, to firmly grasp revolution and promote production during the GPCR meant exercising proletarian dictatorship over revisionist elements that attempted to promote one or the other aspect unilaterally. It was only through the instrument of proletarian dictatorship that the two inseparable aspects of social production – productive forces and relations of production – could be developed as a genuine **dialectical unity**.

The question of which aspect of the dialectic of social production (productive forces, relations of production) is principal at any one time is therefore ultimately a **political** question.

—To put politics in command can mean taking **transformation of relations of production to be principal**. For example, before liberation, China was a semi-colonial semi-feudal society, in which imperialism controlled the lifeline of the economy with its domestic accomplices: the feudal landlord class and the bureaucrat bourgeoisie. Imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucrat capitalism squeezed the working people and the national bourgeoisie, hindering the free development of productive forces. The revolution of 1949 – a revolution in the political superstructure – liberated China’s productive forces by abolishing imperialist privileges in China and smashing comprador-feudal relations of production.

—On the other hand, putting politics in command can mean taking **transformation of productive forces to be principal**, for example by increasing the literacy and overall cultural level of the direct producers, undertaking scientific research, carrying out labor competitions, and organizing campaigns to increase production. Such political activities allow the superiority of the state-owned socialist component of the economy to be brought into full play, unleashing the enthusiasm and creativity of the worker masses.⁵¹ In this way, the revolution promotes the development of productive forces, and through this mediation advances the expansion of socialist relations of production and the restriction of non-socialist relations of production.

The Complete Dialectic of Historical Development

To sum up:

The base/superstructure contradiction determines the contradictory link between the dialectics of the base (forces/relations of production) and the dialectics of the superstructure (the political and ideological class struggles):

⁵⁰ Mao, *Sixty Points on Working Methods*.

⁵¹ Those who uphold the theory of productive forces take instruments of production (dead labor) to be the principal aspect of productive forces. In contrast, Marxists hold that the direct producers (living labor) play the principal role: without their activity, instruments of production would not become real productive forces – neither created, nor used, nor perfected. But only socialism can create the material conditions for the living aspect of productive forces to dominate the dead aspect. Under capitalism, the development of social productive forces tends to increase the domination of dead over living labor by raising the technical composition of capital, reflected in a rising organic composition of capital and a falling rate of profit.

1—The productive forces/relations of production contradiction determines the forms of the ideological and political class struggles, grasped as objective phenomena in the political superstructure.

2—The political class struggle, reinforced or hindered by the ideological class struggle, and grasped as a subjective phenomenon, at once:

—**determines** the principal aspect of the contradiction that defines the base, between productive forces and relations of production; and

—**resolves** the ensemble of contradictions, both objective and subjective.

This is why Marx, in the circular letter between himself and Bebel, Liebknecht, Bracke, etc. from September 17-19, 1879, refers to the class struggle as “*the most **immediate** motive force of history,*” the struggle in which we must concentrate our forces in order to transform society:

*As far as we are concerned, there is only one way open to us after all our past. For nearly 40 years we have emphasized the class struggle as the most **immediate** motive force of history, and especially the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat as the great lever of modern social transformation.*⁵²

The **productive forces/relations of production** contradiction is the remote, fundamental motive force of history, determinant in the final analysis.

The **bourgeoisie/proletariat** contradiction is “*the most immediate motive force of history,*” the key link.

The **base/superstructure** contradiction articulates the internally split terms **fundamental motive force/immediate motive force** with each other in order to give the complete dialectic of historical development.

III. WHAT IS POLITICS?

Politics thus commands the process of historical transformation: it is the principal social practice in relation to which correct ideas about the process of social revolution are formed and verified. What makes a struggle a **political** struggle?

Politics is a complex dialectic with three terms: the **movement** (mass), the **organization** (class), and the **state** (dictatorship). In the revolutionary process, these terms are articulated as follows: the proletariat, organized in its Party and practicing Marxism-Leninism-Maoism, leads the mass movement in its revolutionary relation to the class dictatorship, exercised through the state.

State power is the object of the political class struggle, which is why Lenin wrote that “*only he is a Marxist who extends the recognition of the class struggle to the recognition of the dictatorship of the proletariat.*”⁵³ The political class struggle around the question of state power is divided between the **mass movement** and the **class organization**.

⁵² Marx, *Zirkularbrief an Bebel, Liebknecht, u.a.*, September 17-19, 1879, <http://www.mlwerke.de/me/me19/me19_150.htm>. [Our translation, our emphasis].

⁵³ Lenin, *State and Revolution*, August-September 1917, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/ch02.htm>>.

The Mass Movement

The mass movement is the basis of the political class confrontation. While the mass movement cannot on its own conquer and hold state power – and thus cannot by itself constitute a politics – it nevertheless bears an anti-state content, whatever its particular form (labor struggles, women’s liberation struggles, national liberation struggles ...). The mass movement participates in politics by providing the political class struggle not only with its ideas, but also with its **force**. What matters is not simply the target of the class struggle – after all, there are anti-state struggles mediated by the enemy holding state power – but in addition, the **mode of struggle**.

The masses struggle politically in an embryonic way when they attack the class enemy through an **independent, subjectively-absolute exercise of their force** in a particular class situation, respecting nothing of the class enemy’s power. The independent popular exercise of a subjectively-absolute authority over the class enemy is what we mean by **rebellion**. As Chen Po-ta explained:

*Mao Tse-tung maintained that in the period of revolutionary action, “it was necessary to establish the absolute authority of the peasants. It was necessary to stop malicious criticisms against the peasant association. It was necessary to overthrow all the authority of the gentry...” What Mao Tse-tung had in mind here is the “absolute authority” of the revolutionary people. By qualifying “authority” with “absolute,” he meant that **this authority must dominate everything**; otherwise, the old would not be subjugated and the new would not be able to raise its head.⁵⁴*

The Immediate Vanguard in the Mass Movement

When the rebellion advances in the line of the revolutionary process, it represents the proletarian road in the mass movement. The proletarian road is always led by an immediate vanguard – ‘immediate’ in that it is internal to the mass movement itself, unlike the vanguard organized in the Party. The broad masses of the working people are the stakes of a fierce struggle between two roads and lines within the mass movement. Through the rebellion, the immediate vanguard partially breaks with its objective mass existence as a social class, but in the absence of the Party, this break is doomed to reincorporation. Left to itself, the rebellion represents nothing more than the vain theatrics of protest, condemned as such to the level of ideology.

The masses/state confrontation alone is insufficient to constitute a politics, because mass rebellions on their own cannot achieve the protracted organization of knowledge and force that is required to transform society. It is a perpetual illusion of the intellectual petty bourgeoisie that a revolutionary politics can be constructed solely in the rebellion of the masses against the bourgeois state, and that correct ideas belong entirely to the masses in revolt.

The fragmented and temporary rebellion led by the immediate vanguard produces correct but incomplete ideas. In Mao’s formulation comparing the mass line to factory production, the spontaneous ideological production of the immediate vanguard yields neither raw material nor finished goods, but “*semi-finished products*.”⁵⁵ The spontaneous systematization of the class struggle by the immediate vanguard centers on its antagonistic character. This representation is **correct** in so far as it is adequate to the concrete and dynamic material reality

⁵⁴ Chen Po-ta, *Notes on Mao Tse-tung’s ‘Report of an Investigation into the Peasant Movement in Hunan’*, 1954, <<https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/china/po-ta-mao.pdf>>. [Our emphasis.]

⁵⁵ Quoted in Wang Che, *How Engels Criticized Dühring’s Apriorism*, March 10, 1972, <<https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/peking-review/1972/PR1972-10a.htm>>.

of the revolutionary process organized by the proletariat.⁵⁶

But correct mass political ideas are always **incomplete** insofar as they are fluctuating, partial, and circumscribed by the ideas of the class enemy. In China, the secret societies of the 1920s organized peasant grievances into programs of antagonistic struggle, but these programs had limited horizons and their rational elements were elaborated in a mystical form. Without proletarian leadership, the bourgeoisie or reactionary classes will win out in the end.

Correct mass ideas thus exist as simple and immediate givens within a global context of domination. For this reason they are at once **dispersed** and **divided** – in Mao’s words, they are “*scattered and unsystematic ideas*”:

1—**Dispersed (scattered)**: They exist as cores of knowledge without either durable links between them or an active and conscious relation to history. The dispersal of correct ideas is inevitable without a permanent class organization (the Party) that can take up the project of the whole and **centralize** the cores of knowledge.

2—**Divided (unsystematized)**: They are split between their internal correctness and domination by the class enemy at the level of the whole. This division has its basis in the division of the mass movement between two roads, which requires a permanent class organization that can systematize the left road in the mass movement.

Correct ideas living among the masses belong to the **perceptual stage** of intuitive and living knowledge, which can only lay hold of the partial aspects of things, their appearance, and their external connections, and not things as a whole, their essence, and their internal connections, which can only be reflected by **rational knowledge**. However, the immediate vanguard is able to proceed **incompletely** and **episodically** from superficial, one-sided perceptual knowledge to rational knowledge. As Ai Siqi explains:

*Philosophically speaking, therefore, the manifold unsystematic ideas of the masses basically belong to the category of perceptual knowledge – ‘basically,’ because among the ideas of the masses, there are those that are processed by investigation and thought, more or less synthesized and mature, that is, ideas possessing elements of rational knowledge; and correctly summarized and concentrated systems of ideas belong to the domain of rational knowledge.*⁵⁷

The immediate vanguard represents class relations as essentially antagonistic, resting on a fundamental opposition of interests, while the masses they lead vacillate between representing those relations as (1) essentially antagonistic and (2) essentially non-antagonistic, resting on a fundamental coincidence of interests.

Only the Party can complete the passage from the perceptual stage of knowledge to the rational stage by concentrating and systematizing the **relatively correct ideas of the immediate vanguard** – ‘relatively correct’ because they reflect the objective characteristics of **parts** of things, but do not systematically reflect the whole.⁵⁸ The rational stage of knowledge is a qualitative leap from accumulated concrete, vivid, and complex perceptual impressions to concepts that grasp the essence and whole of things together with their internal relations with other things. Rational knowledge then provides a basis for formulating and implementing line and program, and thus for transforming reality.

⁵⁶ That the revolutionary process is the real social practice that serves as the criterion of correct ideas has as a corollary that reactionary ideas that reinforce political reaction are false.

⁵⁷ Ai Siqi, “Outline of Lectures on Dialectical Materialism,” 527.

⁵⁸ Joseph Dietzgen, quoted in Lenin’s *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, 1908: “*We shall easily see that the ‘world in itself’ and the world as it appears to us, the phenomena of the world, differ from each other only as the whole differs from its parts.*” < <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1908/mec/two3.htm>>.

The Class Organization

That fraction of the masses which opposes the bourgeoisie to the end breaks with its objective mass existence in order to constitute itself as a social and historical force capable of leading the revolutionary process through its far-sightedness, compact organization, and knowledge. For a detachment of the working class as a social class to transform itself into a proletariat, a political class, two things are necessary: a **leading thought**, Marxism; and an **apparatus**, the Party.

Marxism is the ideological production of the Party. It represents social mastery of knowing the society of which the masses are the victims. Marxism is the rational and leading thought that organizes the spontaneously correct ideas of the masses.

The role of the Party is double: (1) to divide the mass movement according to the class antagonism and provide the proletarian road in the mass movement with a permanent proletarian center; and (2) to forge a unified popular camp around the antagonism that can make the revolutionary state project a practicable reality.

(1) Division of the Mass Movement According to the Class Antagonism

A revolutionary politics of the people must have the bourgeoisie/proletariat contradiction at its core.

The Party is the permanent and fixed site from which correct ideas are **centralized** (concentrated from their state of dispersal) and **systematized** (purified from their state of division) via a concrete class analysis that applies Marxist principles to the concrete class situation. The Party is permanent and fixed both in that it is independent of the vagaries of the mass movement and in that it bears the project of the whole, beyond the partiality of mass struggles.

Centralized and systematized ideas are then returned to the masses in the form of political directives that are applied and tested in the mass movement. The Party, says Mao, is a “*processing plant*.”⁵⁹ The Party transforms the **cyclical** process of spontaneous knowledge, which always ends in reincorporation, into a protracted, ascending, and **spiraling** process in which the new and true is victorious in its struggle with the old and the false.

(2) Construction of a Revolutionary Camp

The mass movement can only provide force to the political class struggle if the Party organizes **class alliances**. The Party is not only the vanguard detachment of the working class (Lenin, Stalin), but equally the leading core of the whole people (Mao).

Of course, organizing class alliances is not unique to the socialist revolutionary process. For example, the revolutionary bourgeoisie of the 18th century constructed a revolutionary camp of their allies (peasants and city plebeians) and organized their rebellions against the aristocracy in a revolutionary project, concentrating their correct political ideas in slogans such as “equality, fraternity, liberty.”

⁵⁹ Mao, *Talk at an Enlarged Conference Convened By the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China*, January 30, 1962, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-8/mswv8_62.htm>.

To organize class alliances is what it means to “unite all who can be united.”

The Mass Movement Splits the Party

That the Party centralizes and systematizes proletarian ideas as they live in the mass movement does not mean that the Party is monolithic. The Party not only divides the mass movement, but at the same time, the mass movement divides the Party. The principal lesson of the GPCR is that **the link between the Party and the mass movement is a dialectical link of reciprocal splitting.**

The mass movement prevents the Party from drifting towards revisionism. The splitting of the Party by the mass movement takes place through the process of criticism and subsequent **rectification**, where we understand ‘rectification’ to mean **repetition of the spiraling process of knowledge in light of mass criticism.**

However, it is the Party that is the key term in the complex dialectic of politics constituted by the mass movement, the Party, and the state. The **class perspective** allows the Party to organize class alliances, gather the force of partial mass struggles into the force of the whole, and direct that unified force in relation to the question of state power.

Without the class perspective, without the construction of a revolutionary and popular program, political unification is impossible. The anti-Leninist thesis of the spontaneous convergence of struggles is a petty-bourgeois fantasy.

IV. PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES FOR THE PRESENT

The Maoist conception of correct political ideas is that principles, line, and program have their foundation, more or less mediated, in ideas produced in mass rebellions, rather than in ideas generated by the daily struggle:

—**Principles:** e.g., the smashing of the bourgeois state apparatus is a principle drawn by Marx from the experience of the Paris Commune. That this is a **principle** means that any future revolutionary attempts to bypass it will be sterile.

—**Line:** e.g., the political line of ‘All Power to the Soviets!’ finds its origin in the popular invention of the Soviets, mass organizations thrown up in the revolutionary struggle of 1905, and its immediate source in the growth of such mass organizations following February 1917.

—**Program:** e.g., ‘land to the tiller’ has been at the heart of every bourgeois-democratic agricultural program because it is a demand raised in every peasant rebellion.

The Revolutionary and Popular Program

Of these three elements, the **program** is most closely and immediately tied to the living mass movement.

The program **systematizes** – i.e., it does not simply **transcribe** – ideas yielded by the proletarian road in the real movement, led by the most advanced sections of the masses. From a protracted series of rebellions that continue to live in the present, we can systematize the elements of program. To ‘systematize’ here means to abstract from the real movement in order to construct a point of unity around which struggles can be waged and the revolutionary process advanced. The program formulates advanced popular thought on the revolutionary

transformation of society, taking into account the real relation of forces in the conjuncture, by concentrating a correct class perspective among each layer of the people.

Of course, political line – which concerns itself with the strategic questions of the revolution, power, and the state – is principal in relation to program. Any mass struggle without leadership by a correct ideological and political line can only lead to failure. The Party brings its farsightedness to the mass movement through its political line. This is the sense in which Mao remarked that “*the correctness or otherwise of the ideological and political line decides everything.*”⁶⁰ However, while it is decisive, political line can only be realized through a process in which the masses take up and apply the revolutionary and popular program.

If we attempt to bypass the program and simply put forward the political line of the class organization, we will end up nowhere. Communism is the end result of a long process in which the masses increasingly manage their own affairs, step by step. The program allows the people to take up and apply the political line according to their own aspirations. In Lenin’s words:

*Socialism cannot be decreed from above. Its spirit rejects the mechanical bureaucratic approach; living, creative socialism is the product of the masses themselves.*⁶¹

The revolutionary process proceeds according to the dialectic **general interest/particular interest**. The program formulates the particular interests of this or that section of the masses so that they serve the general interest. Mao always underscored that proper methods of leadership combine the general call with the particular:

*In any task, if no general and widespread call is issued, the broad masses cannot be mobilized for action. But if persons in leading positions confine themselves to a general call – if they do not personally, in some of the organizations, go deeply and concretely into the work called for, make a break-through at some single point, gain experience and use this experience for guiding other units – then they will have no way of testing the correctness or of enriching the content of their general call, and there is the danger that nothing may come of it.*⁶²

For example, the proletarian political line in the countryside is collectivization, but collectivization can only be implemented in steps, beginning with the demand of ‘land to the tiller’ raised by the poor and lower-middle peasantry. ‘Land to the tiller’ does not have a proletarian content, but a bourgeois content. The realization of this programmatic slogan eradicates feudalism by planting the seeds of capitalism in the countryside. Although the proletarian perspective on the countryside is not that of smallholding peasants, Communists must begin the process of revolutionary rural transformation by breaking up feudal estates and distributing plots of land to the land-hungry peasantry.

We can clearly grasp the importance of the revolutionary and popular program by way of a negative example, that of the “left”-opportunist Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge took its arrival in power to signal the arrival of the socialist revolution, as if the bourgeois revolution could simply be skipped. The Khmer Rouge made no attempt to resolve contradictions among the people, to rally the people to the project of socialism in stages, to construct a popular and revolutionary program that proceeded from the existing relations of force.

⁶⁰ Mao, *Talks With Responsible Comrades At Various Places During Provincial Tour*, August-September 1971, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-9/mswv9_88.htm>.

⁶¹ Lenin, *Meeting of the All-Russia Central Executive Committee*, November 4 (17), 1917, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/nov/04a.htm>>.

⁶² Mao, *Some Questions Concerning Methods of Leadership*, June 1, 1943, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_13.htm>.

The Khmer Rouge imposed collectivization all and at once, reinforcing and multiplying divisions among the people that could ultimately only be resolved through extreme violence.

In contrast to Kampuchea, the positive example of agrarian reform in revolutionary China demonstrates how proletarian political line in the countryside (collectivization) can only be advanced through the progressive application of programmatic elements (land to the tiller, cooperatives) – that is, it demonstrates why political line can only be implemented via the method of the **mass line**.

In his speech at the first Chengchow conference, Mao spoke about the importance of the agrarian program and the impossibility of imposing line without program:

*Before the realization of the system of ownership by all the people in the rural area, the peasants remained peasants, and there was a certain dual nature when they walked the socialist path. We can only guide them step by step to divorce themselves from relatively small collective ownership and more toward the system of ownership by all the people via the relatively large collective ownership system, but we cannot ask them to complete the process in one stroke — just as before when we could only guide them step by step to give up the private ownership system in favor of the collective ownership system.*⁶³

The mode of implementing the program must correspond to the popular character of the program itself. ‘Land to the tiller’ cannot be carried out in the bourgeois manner of simply bestowing land on peasants from without. The mass line required the CCP to rely on the political insights and organizational strength of the poor and lower-middle peasantry for the implementation of the agrarian program. The poor and lower-middle peasants had to **rely on their own efforts** to overthrow the landlords and the rich peasants, to acquire and defend land – and thus liberate the rural productive forces.

Example of a Programmatic Element: the Wage Hierarchy

Where do elements of program exist in the class struggle in the US today? We can find an important example in **worker and employee struggles against two-tier contracts**.

Over the past several decades, unions have colluded with the capitalist bosses in imposing two-tier contracts, which divide workers according to wages and benefits – most commonly so that new workers receive lower wages and benefits than do senior workers. Struggles against two-tier contracts have meant recurring worker and employee rebellions against trade unions and the bosses alike.

A key event heralding the general imposition of two-tier wages was the 1983 contract between American Airlines (AA) and the 10,000-member Transport Workers Union, allowing AA to reduce wages for new hires by more than 30%. Within three years, this wage structure spread to nearly all carriers in the airline industry. Since the 1980s, the prevalence of two-tier contracts has grown to include roughly one-third of all newly-bargained agreements throughout the economy. Such contracts are most common in manufacturing.

The United Auto Workers (UAW) provides us with a representative example. Implementing a policy of open collusion – which they called “jointness”(!) – from the early 1980s onwards, the UAW came to embrace two-tier wages, reflected prominently in contracts with the spin-off auto parts suppliers Delphi and Visteon in the

⁶³ Mao, *Speech at the First Chengchow Conference*, November 1958, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-8/mswv8_20.htm>.

early 2000s and then with the Big Three (General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler) in 2007. The agreements in the latter case halved the pay of new workers. There has been a long series of rebellions in recent decades, big and small, both inside and outside of unions, against the division of wages and benefits. These rebellions include the 2004 Southern California grocery workers strike; the 2010 East Coast longshoremen wildcat strike; the rejection of the proposed 2015 Chrysler-UAW contract by the rank and file, acting against the wishes of the union; the 2018 UPS worker struggle against both the Teamsters leadership and UPS

From the rebellions against two-tier contracts we can formulate a key programmatic element for any revolutionary anti-capitalist worker program: **we must combat division by wages and the hierarchy of labor**. This programmatic element is a point around which the struggle against the capitalist organization of labor can be waged under proletarian leadership. The programmatic element against the division of the working class (1) concretely applies the Marxist theory of the wage, and (2) relies on the worker rebellion in order to prepare transformations to come.

The Marxist theory of the wage tells us that the wage-hierarchy is an objective requirement of capitalism. The very objective necessity of the wage hierarchy under capitalism means that to attack the wage hierarchy bears a revolutionary content. However, in formulating such a programmatic element, we must avoid the subjectivist, petty-bourgeois utopia of attempting to abolish the wage-hierarchy without abolishing the wage-relation on which it rests. Petty-bourgeois “left”-opportunists forget that we live in a capitalist society, which cannot be transformed on this or that point by sheer force of revolutionary will. To realize this programmatic element, as others with a proletarian class character, will require overturning the capitalist order by destroying the bourgeois state and organizing the dictatorship of the proletariat.

At the same time, we must also avoid the revisionist, rightist position that dismisses worker rebellions against the wage hierarchy in the name of its objective necessity under capitalism. The existence of such rebellions tell us that the working class has already been subjectively engaged in the struggle against this objective feature of bourgeois society. The revisionist position eternalizes capitalist relations. Revisionists are unable to grasp the future as it lives in the class dynamics of the present because they do not take seriously the fact that the wage hierarchy is the target of a subjective process of rebellion, the process of the **class struggle**.

Therefore, in taking up the programmatic element against division by wages and the hierarchy of labor, we can proceed neither as if we can abolish the capitalist organization of labor without abolishing the capitalist relations of production that sustain it, nor as if worker rebellions against two-tier contracts do not exist. Rather, we must grasp the question of the wage hierarchy as the stakes of a **dynamic process**:

—Do we **extend** the wage hierarchy, reinforcing the privileges of the labor aristocracy?

—Or conversely, do we **restrict** the wage hierarchy by relying on the class struggle, i.e., worker and mass rebellions?

Mass Organizations: the Error of Struggle Committees

The program obtains its force through revolutionary democratic mass organizations. Such mass organizations are constructed and led by Communists and are composed of those who uphold and apply relevant elements of the program.

The principal task of revolutionary democratic mass organizations is to intervene in both daily struggles and the mass movement with the goal of making what emerges in moments of rebellion – the independence of the working masses as a social and historical force with its own perspective on the transformation of society – a permanent political reality.

Such mass organizations pose the **dictatorship of the proletariat in embryo**: they are instruments through which the masses can pursue a subjectively absolute exercise of their power. That such instruments are defined in relation to a program of the whole means that through them, the masses can participate in the force of the whole under proletarian leadership.

Our own experience over the past two years constructing mass organizations in the form of struggle committees, mainly on the housing front, confirms the importance of formulating a program by systematizing ideas that are born in mass rebellions.

We conceived of struggle committees not in relation to a revolutionary and popular program that could advance a proletarian political line, but in relation to concrete sites of struggle. The struggle committee was simply an instrument that ‘collected’ tenants as we found them in the daily struggle around housing. We became organizers of vacillating elements around their immediate interests, rather than organizers of advanced elements around the general interest.

As a consequence, we were unable to make political line – proletarian thought on power and the state – live among the masses in struggle, despite our best efforts at popularization. In the absence of the revolutionary and popular program, the masses were left to their spontaneous consciousness, and beyond that to leadership by the bourgeois state. Without a programmatic basis, struggle committees were apolitical organs that could only persist in localism and defeat. The program is how the political line of the class organization lives in the mass movement. Proletarian politics will be stillborn without a revolutionary and popular program around which to organize the masses.

In one housing complex in Brooklyn, a struggle developed against a landlord who sold the air rights of the building to a developer to build on an adjacent lot just one inch away from the building, threatening to wall in the tenants and block their windows.

We began organizing tenants by holding individual meetings and joint distribution of agitational materials. We were soon invited to participate regularly in meetings of the building tenant association, which was led by a prominent member of a local Democratic Party club. During meetings, we attacked class enemies relentlessly, confronting them directly when they appeared in person at tenant meetings: a local politician, the representative of an NGO, the developers themselves... We eventually proposed a daily picket and a neighborhood march, which we organized together with the section of tenants most sympathetic to our militancy.

However, the tenants we organized had an intermediate character. Our persistent attempts to broaden the struggle, to systematize the spontaneous class consciousness of the masses, to bypass immediate demands, all came to naught – and this for a fundamental reason: the organization was not welded around a program that itself systematized new and combative ideas born in mass revolts against the bourgeoisie and its state.

Since the basis of unity was resolving the immediate struggle, proletarian politics remained stillborn in the face of a narrow practical consideration: who could resolve the situation in favor of the tenants most effectively, a phalanx of lawyers, politicians, and well-funded NGOs – or the tenants, relying on their own forces under Communist leadership?

In the end, the bourgeois officers of the tenant association used us as a hard force for negotiations with the landlord. The tenants eventually followed the road of legalism and capitulation. Today they live in dark apartments, defeated by their supposed saviors, their windows permanently blocked by the brick wall of the new luxury complex next door.

Revisionism and Mass Ideas

Our error in organizing struggle committees on the housing front was temporary and easily reversible. It was not a mistake of political line linked to a subjectivist line of knowledge. We sought the truth according to the line of knowledge of dialectical materialism, and thus we were able to discover and correct our errors. The scientific line of knowledge does not guarantee that we will not make errors, even major errors, but only that we will discover and correct them in good time. As long as we do not abandon the scientific line of knowledge, there will be no wholesale qualitative transformation to a bourgeois political line.

However, when systematizing the daily struggle of the masses is combined with pursuit of a non-proletarian line of knowledge by leadership, the result will inevitably be an error of road, or even of political line. Mistakes of this type can only be discovered and corrected by criticism from outside, and even then, rectification is difficult and far from certain to succeed.

What is the precise relationship between revisionism and a subjectivist line of knowledge?

Lenin writes that “*the revisionists sinned, in the scientific sense, by superficial generalizations based on facts selected one-sidedly.*”⁶⁴ The general philosophical basis of revisionism is empiricism. As we argued above, empiricism takes partial and perceptual knowledge for comprehensive and rational knowledge, and thus opens up a gap between thought and being. Like dogmatism, empiricism is a form of practical idealism, that is, **subjectivism**.

Revisionists are so-called because they revise the basic principles of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism, emphasizing new experience and practice at the expense of principles established over the historical course of the International Communist Movement. The mass line draws a line of demarcation with revisionism. Revisionists do not construct a program that serves the general interest on the basis of mass practices of popular rebellion. On the contrary: revisionists deploy individual experiences and temporary phenomena drawn from the daily struggle in order to draw up a program that serves private interests.

For example, the modern revisionists of the Greek Communist Party (KKE) have had the experience that in the absence of revolution, they can maintain a position in parliament and local government, drawing a fat salary, and for this reason they oppose anything that threatens the existing parliamentary order – whether proletarian revolution from the left or fascism from the right. They systematize the daily struggle – and not mass rebellions – in order to perpetuate bourgeois society as it currently exists. This systematization takes the form of **trade unionism**, barely covered over by a purely formal, false Marxism. Trade unionism separates the working class and the people from politics by substituting the capital-labor contradiction for the **political contradiction** between the bourgeoisie organized in its state and the proletariat organized in its Party. The bourgeois state is therefore allowed to persist in its current form. The reverse coin of trade unionism is **parliamentary cretinism**.

Revisionists like the KKE put forward a trade unionist program that systematizes the workers’ daily struggle precisely in order to separate the working class from politics, to enclose them in the workplace, to obliterate the boundary between the Party and the class. Revisionists organize the working class according to its most vacillating and opportunist elements, against the Leninist conception of the Party as a vanguard detachment of the working class that organizes its most active and conscious elements. In the hands of revisionists, the vanguard Party of the proletariat degenerates into a **labor party**.

⁶⁴ Lenin, *Marxism and Revisionism*, April 3 (16), 1908, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1908/apr/03.htm>>.

Here we must recall that, according to Lenin, revisionism **sacrifices the fundamental interests of the proletariat for its immediate interests:**

To determine its conduct from case to case, to adapt itself to the events of the day and to the chopping and changing of petty politics, to forget the primary interests of the proletariat and the basic features of the whole capitalist system, of all capitalist evolution, to sacrifice these primary interests for the real or assumed advantages of the moment—such is the policy of revisionism.⁶⁵

Communists do not sum up the daily struggle in order to return to it. Communists sum up worker and mass rebellions in order to advance the process of social revolution.

The Present Task and the Road Ahead

Does the Maoist conception of correct ideas mean that Communists must only organize the masses there where they are already rebelling? Such a practical conclusion would be erroneous for many reasons, principal among them that it would amount to **spontaneism**. The Party is a permanent instrument of the masses to implement the proletarian political line and the revolutionary and popular program, whatever the current state of the mass movement. The revolutionary process does not die when rebellions die. The task of the Party is to bring the masses to rebellion against the bourgeois state even in periods of relative inactivity. The immediate vanguard and the mass movement are not objective facts to be **found** in particular class situations, but are rather active forces that must be **conquered** and **consciously organized** around a revolutionary and popular program that advances a proletarian political line.

Today we must oppose all those apolitical trends – from “serve the people” charities to “base building” – that effectively maintain the masses there where they already are, cutting them off from **the question of the Party and program of the whole people**, the central question that Communists must take up today.

It is only from the ideas of the masses in rebellion that Maoists can construct the revolutionary and popular program. If we simply rely on those who **restrict the struggle** to their own experience of exploitation and oppression and **mediate its resolution** through the class enemy – if we attempt to construct the program from the perspective of those who remain within their objective social determination and fail to constitute themselves as a social and historical subjective **force** – then we can only end up with a reformist program that effectively socializes popular demands within the existing order and does nothing to resolve the fundamental contradiction of capitalism, between the social character of production and the private character of appropriation.

The central task today for Maoists is clear. If we are to make our way out of the darkness that has obscured the road forward for the International Communist Movement for the past 40 years, we must pose the question of the Party to the broad masses while we construct mass organizations around the revolutionary and popular program, on every front. In order to do this, we can only proceed from the proletarian class perspective as it currently lives among the rebellious masses.

⁶⁵ Ibid.