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Maoism

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Maoism refers to an ensemble of revolutionary ideas and practices inspired by the life and work of the Chinese political leader and philosopher Mao Tse-tung (1893–1976). Broadly, these ideas and practices seek to deploy militant, even violent methods to install a new radical democratic regime that is committed to the collective pursuit of dignity, freedom, and equality. Maoists expect the masses to engage in a protracted struggle to liberate themselves from their present condition of bondage, and they see the revolutionary party as simply the sum total of mass dissent in society. Although Maoism was born and developed in revolutionary China, it has long ceased to be confined there and now guides radical democrats in societies as diverse as France, India, and Peru.

Maoism departs from classical Marxist thought in three significant ways. First, classical Marxist-Leninists understood the working class or the proletariat as the key bearer of the communist revolutionary message against the modern capitalist order. By comparison, the peasantry and the countryside were seen as too backward or, simply, feudal vestiges from a bygone era. For Maoists, however, peasants are

the primary agents of revolutionary action (Hinton 1966). More generally, the ordinary mass of people, who constitute the majority in any society, are potential revolutionaries. The ruling classes, too, are not simply the urban bourgeoisie, but also the rural landowners, colonial collaborators, and traditional rulers. Second, for Marxist-Leninists, following Lenin's writings on the Bolshevik Party's role in fomenting revolution in Russia, the intellectuals who formed the ideological leadership or vanguard of the revolutionary party were expected to formulate social theories that would inform the revolutionary strategies to be pursued by the proletarian cadres. Whereas Maoists appreciate the need for a party vanguard, they view intellectuals first as first students of mass politics and culture and only then as teachers or mentors of the masses in the theory and practice of revolution (Thomson 1971). The emphasis is on a symbiotic relationship between vanguard and mass rather than on a vertical, top-down relationship as dictated by classical Marxist principles of party organization. Third, Marxist-Leninist theories, drawing on Hegel's notion of historical dialectics and on Marx's and Engels's dialectical materialism, saw every socioeconomic order in human history as being defined and characterized by a particular mode of production and a corresponding set of

The Encyclopedia of Political Thought, First Edition. Edited by Michael Gibbons.
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contradictory social relations. The contradictions between social classes serve, then, as the motor of revolutionary social change, which seeks to resolve or transcend existing social contradictions. For Maoists, these contradictions are social antagonisms that the masses need to overcome via a struggle against the ruling classes in order to win power for themselves. At the same time, there are also contradictions within the revolutionary masses; these need not be overcome, because they are not only natural but also productive for society as a whole (Koller 1974; Soo 1981).

- (i) In its quest for a radically egalitarian world, Maoism challenges the Eurocentric worldview of western Marxism, as it posits ordinary men and women as makers of revolutionary history. Mao himself saw Marxist-Leninist formulations as too elitist and distant from the everyday challenges and concerns of the masses, especially those living in the colonized or formerly colonized regions of the world. As chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, he endeavored to produce theoretical knowledge that was practice-oriented rather than arcane and abstruse. Taking a “mass line” meant, above all, placing ordinary people at the center of revolutionary theory and practice. Four propositions follow from this premise: Because most of the world’s population lives in the countryside, especially in nonwestern societies, it makes no sense to pin one’s hopes for radical social change on the industrial working classes of the North Atlantic world. Instead, there is every reason to focus on building revolutionary capacities in rural societies, a painstaking but necessary task that Maoists must undertake.
- (ii) Revolutionary social change is a protracted affair that requires the unmaking of existing structures of class rule as well as the making of new democratic structures of mass rule. Since war is an extension of everyday politics, defined as class

antagonisms, guerilla warfare is the method best suited for the protracted struggles that will lead ultimately to a social revolution. Assaults on the status quo and retreat into safe territory are, both, equally Maoist tactics (Tse-tung 1965).

- (iii) The process of eliminating class contradictions in society entails two mutually reinforcing steps: (a) de-classing, or renunciation of class privileges on the part of intellectual-activists in the course of learning from the everyday workings of mass politics and culture, and (b) instructing the masses on the objective social realities that structure their existence, thereby paving the way for a cultural revolution to wipe away existing structures of thought and habit that subjugate the masses in their present condition (D’Mello 2009).
- (iv) There is a moral and political imperative to overcome the status quo in society by eliminating the class contradictions or antagonisms that currently oppress and exploit the masses. In other words, political quietism is never a defensible option, either for the Maoist intellectual-activist or for the masses themselves.

In each of these propositions, theory and practice – or thinking and doing, in Mao’s terms – are inseparable from each other: revolutionary ideas facilitate practice and vice-versa. What Maoists share above all is a commitment to understanding empirically an objective social reality outside of our minds in order to create a better and more just world (Tse-tung 2007). Similarly, the revolutionary masses and the Maoist party are tied inextricably to each other: far from being a top-down organization, the party is imagined as the summation of revolutionary impulses within the ranks of the masses. Sometimes the people propel the party’s political agenda, and sometimes the party propels the people toward their goals (Tse-tung 1966).

Maoism’s greatest impact has arguably been outside Mao’s China. In Asia, Africa, and

Latin America, the flame of Mao Tse-tung's revolutionary thought has been kept alive by Maoist parties seeking to overthrow what they characterize as semifeudal, semicolonial regimes. In Peru, Abimael Guzmán, a professor of philosophy, founded the Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso), which deployed Mao's doctrines of guerrilla warfare, new democracy, and cultural revolution during its bloody conflict with the state during the 1980s. The Shining Path guerrillas were, however, severely criticized for their emphasis on political violence and their gross inability to adapt Marxist, especially Maoist, ideas to the particular cultural-historical realities of Peruvian society (Starn 1995). Nonetheless, the failed Peruvian revolutionaries became the model for Maoists in far-away Nepal, to launch a mass offensive against an oppressive constitutional monarchy between 1996 and 2006. The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) took advantage of the country's mountainous terrain and drew upon popular experiences of marginalization and domination, especially among indigenous (*janjati*) groups, in order to mobilize rural cadres (Lecomte-Tilouine 2010). Mao's practice-oriented philosophy, his notion of just war carried by the masses against their traditional oppressors, and his distinctive theory of social contradictions – each of these had to be translated into effective revolutionary action by the Nepalese Maoists during their decade-long civil war. The Communist Party of India (Maoist), formed in 2004, has tried to emulate their Nepalese neighbors along these lines. But contemporary Indian Maoists have encountered the same difficulty in translating Maoism into effective revolutionary practice that an earlier generation of Maoists, the Naxalites, faced during the late 1960s and early 1970s, namely the inability to come to terms with the peculiarities of a caste-ridden society, multiple, overlapping social antagonisms, and shifting mass allegiances (Chandra forthcoming). The Naxalites, like their postcolonial peers in Tanzania, sought inspiration in Mao's writings as they tried to replace what they saw as unpopular comprador

regimes with a new people's democracy (Lal 2011). Over time, therefore, the rest of the so-called third world has proved far more responsive to Maoist thought and practice than its birthplace in China.

Beyond the third world, Maoism has enthralled some of the brightest minds in the North Atlantic world in the latter half of the twentieth century. After the tumultuous year of 1968, Maoism offered a new lease of life to a section within the left intelligentsia in western Europe (Wolin 2010). Whereas British and American Marxists struggled to defend the ruthless authoritarian policies of Stalin and his successors, a group of French Marxists embraced Maoist militancy for their own ends. For the likes of Jean-Paul Sartre (and, more recently, Alain Badiou), Maoism became the basis for critiquing the top-down vanguardist tendencies within the French Communist Party, reviving the historical memory of the popular revolt in 1789, and imagining radical utopian futures in which a radical democratic culture could emerge. Even outside official Marxist circles, radical intellectuals such as Julia Kristeva and Michel Foucault found inspiration in Maoist thought, in their respective efforts to end the intellectual deadlock between structuralists and existentialists. The concrete, empirical experience of social protest in 1968 rejuvenated these intellectuals and enabled them to articulate their distinctive poststructuralist theories of the self and of power. For Marxists and non-Marxists alike, Maoism became a powerful motif of popular protest, a critique of Leninist vanguardism, and a warrant for creative self-expression and cultural renewal. Little or no attention was paid to the historical and cultural specificities of Maoism in China, especially to the violence, poverty, and famine that marked the decade of the 1960s there. Even today, Badiou's (2013) exhortation to intellectuals to embrace political militancy deliberately abstracts a central tenet of Maoist thought from its original sociocultural context. Other prominent contemporary European Marxists such as Slavoj Žižek and Antonio Negri, though faithful to the Marxist-Leninist

insistence on a centralized vanguard party, have repeatedly turned to Maoism to justify the need for popular revolt against global structures of capitalist domination.

In the twenty-first century, the future of Maoism looks as bright as before. Worldwide economic recession in an age of finance capital has fuelled widespread popular discontent and protests in both western and nonwestern societies. Mass militancy finds ready justification in Maoist thought and practice. Equally, the seductive promise of radical democratic futures remains. Yet the tragic possibility of dashed utopian hopes perpetually threatens to check the onward march of Maoism.

SEE ALSO: Badiou, Alain (1937–); Engels, Friedrich (1820–95); Foucault, Michel (1926–84); Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich (1770–1831); Kristeva, Julia (1942–); Lenin (Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov) (1870–1924); Marx, Karl (1818–83); Negri, Antonio (1933–); Sartre, Jean-Paul (1905–80); Žižek, Slavoj (1949–).

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Abstract

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Keywords: Maoism, Marxism-Leninism, popular sovereignty, radicalism, revolution, violence

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