

## SECTION I: ON STUDYING AND PRACTICING MARXISM

### I. The purpose of this section

Marxism has always placed a heavy emphasis on study. From early in their careers, Marx and Engels consistently stressed that proletarian socialist revolutions would differ from all previous social revolutions in that they would require "class consciousness." They proposed that these revolutions would only succeed if the revolutionary masses clearly and scientifically understand the nature of their social world, their place in it, and concrete ways to change it. And this, they observed, demands the study of scientific theory.

Today in the US, all Marxist-Leninists agree that study and application of theory is an important facet of socialist activity. However, there is sharp disagreement--either explicitly or implicitly--over the proper method of study, over the proper relationship between study and practice, and even over the nature of Marxist theory itself. These are not just academic disagreements. It is not going too far to say that erroneous attitudes toward study and theory are among the root-causes of the isolation, frustration, and factionalism of the US left today.

For these reasons this study group will begin by focusing on the question of study. But beyond these general reasons there is a more immediate and particular one: hopefully, we will be able to gain insights into the Marxist method of study that we can apply during the remainder of the study group.

### II. The readings for this section

The readings for this section are three essays by Mao-Tsetung in 1941-2 (see Reading List) during the Rectification Campaign in the Chinese Communist Party. This campaign was aimed at correcting errors made by Chinese Communists--errors that were holding the Party back in its struggle to establish representative ties with the broad masses, and to lead the masses in building a powerful revolutionary movement. To aid study group members in reading these essays, we have decided to outline some of Mao's main themes and to give summary definition of terms.

In these essays Mao targets errors in the <sup>h</sup>sphere of study and "method of thinking" as the key problem. He identifies such errors as variants of "subjectivism." For Mao the "subjectivist method" is the polar opposite of the objective, scientific method of Marxism. Thus subjectivism refers to the general tendency to mistake one's own desires, wishes, and "enthusiasms" (that is, one's own "subjectivity") for a studied analysis of reality.

Mao singles out two types of subjectivism. First there is "dogmatism", which violates the "critical spirit of Marxism" by approaching study as the memorization of "isolated conclusions or principles from Marxist texts." Second is "empiricism" or "pragmatism", which substitutes individual "partial experiences" and impressions for thorough study. The results of subjectivism in study are manifested in practice as "sectarianism." Mao speaks of sectarianism as both the isolation of communists from the masses of the people, and as the development of

antagonism between Party officials and Party rank-and-file. In these essays, Mao singles out one particularly problematic form of sectarian practice, when he attacks "stereo-typed party writing"--a problem that remains with us today.

In addition to his constant insistence that study and theory must be objective, Mao argues again and again that study and theory must be closely linked to practice. According to Mao the proper role of theory is to "lead" practice. But theory must be subordinated to the needs of practice, and it must constantly "theorize", or analyze and draw scientific conclusions from the experiences of practice (as Lenin said, theory must treat practice as "social experiment"). Focusing on study and theory in isolation from practice leads to what Mao calls "book learning"--abstract knowledge that may be useless to revolutionary struggle and that remains unverified by revolutionary practice.

### III. Plan for the discussion of this section

In order to get the maximum collective benefit from our discussion of Mao's essays, and of the question of the Marxist method of study, we propose that the study group meeting be organized along the following lines:

First, the group should systematically review the main themes of the essays, by collectively getting out the central arguments, some of which are schematically outlined above. The essays that we are reading for this week are so consistent in theme that they should probably be reviewed together, rather than one by one, in sequence.

Second, questions and observations about secondary points in the essays should be raised and addressed. We feel that it is important to hold discussion of secondary points until the main arguments of the readings are clear. This will allow us to put these points into proper perspective and to keep the discussion of the main themes on track.

Third, the arguments of the readings should be critically evaluated in terms of the experiences and ideas of the group members: critical questions and disagreements should be raised and alternative ideas should be put forth. Moreover, all of this should be concretized in terms of problems facing us in our political practices and in our own lives. That is, we should attempt to apply and to illustrate the general analyses we have discussed in terms of our own "concrete realities."

It is our feeling that all members of the study group, no matter what their experiences in the past and no matter what their current practices are, have experiences and ideas that they can draw on in this regard. For example, how many of us have read a leaflet--or tried to write a leaflet!--and encountered problems similar to those that Mao discusses around the question of "stereo-typed party writing? Or how many of us have participated in political activities "pragmatically", or substituted abstract quotations for studied analysis?

Fourth and finally, Finally the group should do a collective self-evaluation of the success of the discussion, of the readings, etc. In other words, the group should attempt to practice "criticism/self-criticism." Unfortunately the practice of criticism/self-criticism is one of the great myths of the Marxist-Leninist movement in this country. It is usually carried out for a while in a stiff, ritualized manner (which usually fails), then is dropped in a somewhat embarrassed

silence. However, if this study group is to work well, it is very necessary that we learn how to collectively assess what we have done, identify past weaknesses and strengths, and get everyone's ideas on how to do better in the future. Perhaps the best short description of this process was made by Amilcar Cabral: "constructive criticism and frank self-criticism."

A final point, it is objectively true that some members of the study group have read more Marxist theory in the past than others, and that some have had more political experience than others. It is inevitable that this will manifest itself in a tendency for some to dominate the discussions and lead them away from areas of common need and interest. It will also manifest itself in a tendency for some to remain silent at points for fear of raising a "stupid" question or idea. For the study group to function collectively and successfully, these very natural tendencies must be overcome. It is our feeling that this problem in particular should be constantly evaluated and re-evaluated during "constructive criticism and frank self-criticism."

M.L.E.P.

