

# Critique of the “Backward Masses” Theory

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Translated by Dennis Etler.]

I was moved to write this after reading Shan Yue’s on-line article, “Persist in the Massline.”

At “Utopia” there have been a number of essays that clearly look down on the masses. Some say that today’s worker/peasant masses have low consciousness and are hopeless. Some disparage the masses for singing “red songs” and “hip-hop.” They ask how can this raise their consciousness or resurrect the socialist road?

First, this type of thinking lacks class analysis. Today most of the laboring masses have already been thoroughly confused by bourgeois and revisionist thinking. But this isn’t the masses fault. It is the result of a breach in the cultural and intellectual front over the last few years by the bourgeoisie and a resurgence of capitalist social relations seen in all social strata. Nevertheless, the worker/peasant masses still have the greatest desire for socialism and are the greatest opponents of the capitalist social stratum.

In the present stage of struggle against the bourgeoisie and capitalist ideology the resurgence of socialist culture and the renewal of socialist education is without doubt the first most important step. Moreover the broad masses saw this early on. Over the last few years no one has promoted socialist education, so the masses have taken it upon themselves to do so. They have spontaneously taken up the singing of “red songs,” the display of Chairman Mao’s image and talk of the special goodness of the Mao era. Yet some intellectuals or those polluted by bad intellectual airs think that socialist education must consist of long-winded pedantic essays and rebuke the worker/peasant masses for having a low level of consciousness and not understanding what socialism is all about. But I ask you, how many of these essays are actually written for a mass audience? Most lack a popular touch and are full of pedantic rhetoric and senseless blather. In fact most have no idea what socialism really is. If the essays at “Utopia” continue to stay detached from the workers and peasants it will in the end become a worthless site. During the “Cultural Revolution” the theory of the “backward masses” was already criticized, but many here still subscribe to it. Chairman Mao said, “to become a teacher of the masses you must first become their student.” There are those who prattle on about educating the masses, but what have they learned from them? Have you just learned the few words “backward masses?”

So I see that those comrades who strive to promote the “red culture movement” such as Comrade Bo Xilai are, from their work style, by comparison correct. The “red culture movement” was devised by the masses. Many comrades have popularized and spread it amongst the masses. This is the working style of from the masses to the masses. Marxism seizes the initiative of the masses it doesn’t impose itself on the masses. Look at what Chairman Mao did, he took hold of the mass movement, “In Industry Learn from Daqing, In Agriculture Learn from Dazhai.” “Let the Nation Learn from the PLA,” the “Three anti (anti-corruption, anti-waste, anti-bureaucracy) and Five anti Campaigns (anti-bribery, anti-theft of state property, anti-tax evasion, anti-cheating on government contracts, anti-stealing state economic information),” the “People’s Communes,” “The Angang Constitution,” “The Four Great Freedoms of Great Democracy (speaking out freely, airing views fully, holding great debates, and writing big character posters),” “Red Guards,” “Barefoot Doctors,” “721 Worker’s Colleges,” “Mass

Criticism,” etc., etc., all these were developed by the masses themselves. Chairman Mao grasped the socialist spirit and substance of these new born creations of the masses and then returned them to the masses to experiment with and popularize. Chairman Mao never saw himself as the self-appointed leader of the masses or the masses as being the playthings of the bureaucracy. Chairman Mao's massline is real true socialist democracy. So one's work style determines the standard of whether one is or is not a Marxist. The so-called practice of Marxism is the process by which the masses grasp hold of Marxism. If you from the get go suspect that the masses have low consciousness how will they ever carry on some sort of Marxism?

The masses certainly want to raise their revolutionary theoretical level, but most important is raising their cultural level, not some delusional attempt to make everyone into a revolutionary theoretician or a talented revolutionary success. By cultural level is meant one's basic value system, one's view of life, basic norms of living, according to the concrete conditions of everyday life. Comrade Lei Feng sacrificed himself when he was only 22. He was not some theoretician, but he was a great Communist fighter, he was a model of the new socialist person. There was the even younger Liu Wenxue young heroine of the grasslands, etc., etc. They understood that collectivism and socialism were more precious than an individual's life. Based on their value system and fundamental view of life they had already become new socialist people. Of course they should also continue to raise their revolutionary theoretical level, but it was already based on their progress in consolidating and deepening their fundamental value system, view of life and world view. At the same time the raising of mass consciousness is most importantly the masses teaching themselves in the midst of the historical movement. If one only conducts theoretical debates to teach the masses Marxism, that will make Marxism into a theology or a metaphysics.

In short, just as Chairman Mao stated, “The masses are the real heroes, while we ourselves are often childish and ignorant.” The masses create their own revolutionary mass movement. Not only do they transform the objective world but they also transform their own subjective world. The political party of the proletariat has leadership of the masses not because it is particularly smarter than the masses but precisely because they grasp the innate superiority of the masses character, not the idea of the masses backwardness.”

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