

# Chinese Cultural Revolution: Failure and Theoretical originality

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1. The years of seventies in the last century witnessed a period of transition of revolutions in the world going downward from their full swing. In the capitalist west, new liberalism began to resurge in the defeat of social democratic parties and trade unions. Capitalists in the world united through economic globalization. In the east, the Great Cultural Revolution in China declared its failure with the passing of Mao Zedong, and China began to stride toward capitalism. Communist parties in the Soviet Union and east European countries lost their enthusiastic idealism, becoming more and more of bureaucratic dictatorships, thus foreshadowing their total collapse in the end of eighties. Up till now, the banner of communism is still on display only in Cuba, yet this country seems not fully confident about its future.

*How all these situations happened? In particular, how did the Chinese Cultural Revolution originate and fail? And what can we learn from these events?*

*What caused the Chinese Cultural Revolution to fail?*

2. In today's China, the Cultural Revolution is a term synonymous to disaster, fallacy and craziness. However, with the emergence of new exploiting class and the return in reality of capitalism, a great number of old cadres who were criticized and attacked during the Cultural Revolution began to recognize the necessity of the Cultural Revolution. Evidently, Mao's apprehension turned to be very reasonable: "the capitalist representatives who sneaked into the party, the government, the army and cultural institutions are reactionary revisionists, and when time comes they will take over the power and turn the proletariat dictatorship into capitalist dictatorship."

3. Unfortunately, it was too late. At the time, these old cadres were unable to understand: How could these capitalist-roaders get into the party in the first place? Why couldn't they simply be captured? How came that they themselves were criticized and attacked as

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capitalist—readers? Now they realized that those capitalist—readers were in fact revolutionaries in wartime, and were in symbolic terms the other part in them that should be removed—the selfish desire. Those revolutionaries chose socialism in their earlier age because they wanted to save the country from foreign invasion and people from exploitation. Though having received much education in terms of revolutionary idealism and party discipline, most of them were not really elevated into unselfish fighters entirely devoted to the ideal of communism, hoping they could somehow benefit personally from a victorious revolution.

4. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, many cadres gradually became bureaucrats fighting for higher ranks and better rewards. They turned their working units into their "turfs" while lack of education in general and technical knowledge in particular led them commit incredible mistakes. The rectification movement launched in 1957 in China was aimed at consolidating and educating party cadres, and eliminating bureaucrats with the help of common people and the force of democracy. Since the beginning of this movement, people responded enthusiastically to Mao's call, and spoke up against party leaders at all levels. An old friend of mine, who was in his twenties and worked in Sichuan province at the time, told me that only then did he feel that the sun came out of clouds and shone brightly. This was definitely the truth feeling of an ordinary people. Selfish cadres were under fierce attack by the mass, feeling very much nervous. Unfortunately, some intellectuals went too far as to deny the leadership of the communist party, demanding that they take the office. Mao had to counterattack them and labeled them as "rightists" (a term equal to reactionaries who should be prosecuted at the time). However, Deng Xiaoping, who was the then secretary-general of the party, maximized the movement in an effort to encourage officials at all levels to attack those leftists who sincerely criticized party bureaucrats. And his effort in fact strengthened the power of bureaucracy.

5. Mao was not well informed of the scale-up of anti-rightist campaign. Not until the Great Leap Forward Movement failed did Mao realize that bureaucratic officials became more rampant. They made false reports, issued blind orders, flattered their leaderships, and deceived followers. They turned a mass movement of building socialism in a fast, effective and efficient way into an astonishing display of sluggish and wasteful bureaucracy. Facing this situation, Mao had to make concession to bureaucrats and make do with limited preparedness of the mass. The result was the emergence of the "people's communes" which consisted of three levels of ownerships with production unit as the basic level of ownership. In the field of industry the policy guideline was to readjust, consolidate and upgrade industrial production. However, bureaucratic officials were not satisfied with these concessive moves and appealed for regression into private ownership, claiming that selfishness is the true and legitimate motivation in production. Mao was quick to sense the reactionary nature of this appeal. Pointing out that "governance is also a process of socialist education," Mao launched during 1963-1966 a nationwide campaign called "socialist

education movement,” also known as “four clean-ups movement” to purify politics, economy, organization and ideology.

6. It was during this movement that Mao finally identified the existence of a group of powers that be within the communist party who intended to take a capitalist-bound road. This group of people in power manifested themselves in the form of “factionalism.” Originally consisted of many small factions, they gradually merged into an institutional establishment—officialdom—centered on their self-interests. This establishment under the name of Chinese Communist Party was certainly not committed to the ideals of communism but to the manipulation of power and resources. They betrayed the public interest and transformed themselves into a new class, bureaucratic class. If a capitalist personifies capital, a bureaucrat personifies power. Bureaucrats exploit workers by means of power while capitalists do the same by means of capital. Therefore, bureaucratic class can be defined as bureaucratic capitalist class. Obviously, it was impossible to trust such people in power to carry out the “four clean—ups movement” targeted at just themselves. So Mao realized that such a movement headed by Liu Shaoqi, criticized as the biggest capitalist—roader in China during the Cultural Revolution could by no means succeed. Liu targeted the movement at grass—root cadres and common people instead of big bureaucrats, making it look like a leftist move but in fact a rightist one.

7. Learning from the lessons that even campaigns like purification and “four clean—ups” movements could not shake officialdom at all, and that the establishment had betrayed the ideals of communism and the people, Mao thought that the only way to turn the country on the right track was to call for a class struggle, to mobilize people and let them organize themselves in fighting against the establishment. So there came the Cultural Revolution.

8. Inner—party struggles were indeed not a phenomenon exclusive to China. In the communist parties of former Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Vietnam, and North Korea, and I think to some extent Cuba would not be an exception, the same problem also existed or exists. Only very few cadres stick to communist ideals and are loyal to the people while the majority have gradually lost their original aspiration, and became obsessed in material web—being. They use their power to gain personal benefit against the public interest. In the west, social democratic parties and trade unions are also corrupted by power when they come into office. They come to terms with shortsightedness of ordinary people and lose international vision. They are content with welfare society. They lose touch with the people. Even some progressive intellectuals are no exception. They win respect from the people when they speak for them. Yet when they are high-fed, they speak above the people.

9. Reviewing history, we learn that Christianity, originally a weapon used by the exploited against the ruling class, has been turned into a vehicle through which the ruling class anesthetize and exploit people. Buddhism established itself as an influential religion in the east by condemning human beings’ material desire and by persuading people to detach themselves from terrestrial world. Yet it has gradually become a place for accepting offerings and worshipping fortune and fame. It has been turned into a source of collecting wealth and

exercising power. Buddhism is no longer a critical resource. Mozi in ancient China was a leader of the toilsome. He established an association of Mohism whose members led a simple life and practiced asceticism and self—education. They promoted philanthropism and peace, helped the poor and the needy. In many ways Mozi was very much like Jesus Christ. However, fighting for influence and personal interest emerged within the association as early as when Mozi was still alive.

10. Historical evidences indicate that fighting between idealism/altruism and secularism/individualism is an issue that every organization devoted to reforming the society has to face. In human history, it seems, secularism/individualism gains an upper hand when the society adopts the principle of following the tides with revisionism and discards ideals. Such is the rule of historical cycle: when individuals pursue self—interest in luxury and extravagance in a polarized society and history witnesses wars and disorder, idealists committed to reforming the society emerge to establish new organizations and present appealing programs to reestablish social order, and the society goes from decline to prosperity; when orders are established and idealism loses its momentum and gives way to secularism and materialism, the society goes downward.

11. As the founder of the Communist Party of China, Mao faced just this long—lasting paradox. Different to all historical idealists, Mao was determined not to give in when facing the challenge from within the party to abandon idealism. Challenging this historical cycle, he decided to stage a campaign of “criticizing selfishness and attacking revisionism” in an effort to shake the party together and revert it back to the track of serving the people.

12. The way Mao chose to achieve this goal was, on the one hand, to initiate the so—called “great democracy,” a bottom—up movement which allowed the establishment of various spontaneous organizations engaging in “voicing free speeches through big—character posters. On the other hand, he called for a top—down mass education of the people to “criticize selfishness and attacking revisionism.” Theoretically speaking, as the means and the end respectively, these two measures are actually the only method to persuade and force bureaucrats back to alliance with the people.

13. However, bureaucratic clique had their way of counterattacks. They fought back on their own turfs. They organized their beneficiaries, party members and officials royal to them to confront revolutionists. Though the rebels against the establishment had Mao as their spiritual leader and few true revolutionist as their backbones, they were in a disadvantageous position since they did not enjoy necessary resources, means to organize themselves and the backing of the army. In contrast, royalists were in general better educated, and enjoyed higher political and economical status as well as technological resources that enabled them to beat their opponents. Consequently, the “great democracy movement” ended in the defeat of idealism presented by Mao Zedong. What was worse, in the fighting both the two forces upheld the banner of Mao, took to their advantage the existing political means and fought for their personal revenge and own interests, turning an ideological revolution into one that

touched not the soul but the flesh. The Cultural Revolution thus lost both its political and moral basis, and ended in total failure.

14. Such an outcome was anticipated by Mao. When he saw the strong resistance by bureaucratic clique in the “four clean—ups movement” and therefore seriously considered initiating this bottom—up democratic movement, Mao was well aware of the possibility of encountering fierce resistance. The target of this movement — the bureaucratic clique — consisted of the elites of the party and the army who fought along with him and contributed illustriously for the party to win the revolution. They expected to “host the country” after they fought for it. They could and had been courageous in fighting against external enemies under the leadership of Mao, but when it came to responding to his call for inner struggle against egoism, they stepped back and resisted. At the highest level of leadership, Mao almost could not find one that he could rely on. Lin Biao was talented and capable, but could not be trusted entirely. Although trustworthy, Jiang Qing —his wife— was not a capable leader. Zhou Enlai and Zhu De could obey his orders, but they could not understand the Cultural Revolution. As for Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, they were actually leaders of bureaucratic clique, the target of the Cultural Revolution. Another senior leader, Chen Yun, was also one that could not be trusted because he was a worldly—wise and made himself safe in the struggle between the two forces. Nevertheless, Mao was determined to test the will and the power of the bureaucratic clique against his popular mana at the summit of his power. Therefore he alone staged the Cultural Revolution.

15. In painful retrospect, we might assume that the political fighting during the Cultural Revolution could be within control and the possibility of idealistic education being successful could be greater if all the members of the standing committee of the political bureau had an attitude toward the Cultural Revolution similar to Mao, and the representatives of the bureaucratic clique occupied leading positions only as high as in the political bureau — short of the standing committee. If such educational movement had been successful in cultivating generation after generation new followers, could their democratic power of deterring local bureaucratic forces be much stronger? And if so, can the tendency toward revisionism be checked and finally eliminated, and idealistic organizations maintain their vitality forever?

16. Following this line of thought, we realize the ultimate cause of the failure of the Cultural Revolution can be traced back to the year 1921 when the Communist Party of China was founded. At the time China was under great turmoil and foreign threats. The October Revolution of 1917 in Russia brought Marxism to China, pointing out a right direction for those bewildered intellectuals who later found the Communist Party of China. Among those founders of the party, some dropped out, some betrayed the party, and some stayed in because they hoped to benefit from it. The better parts of them were those who were determined to save the country and the people. Yet there were very few true idealists, and among these few revolutionists, only one — Mao Zedong — had great vision and capability

with consistent perseverance. Reviewing various types of idealistic organizations in history, rarely can we find one leader comparable to Mao.

17. Such was the lesson we should learn from history: without a number of Mao, a revolutionary organization may decompose, and a successful revolution may still fail. Of course, without preconditions such as deep social exploitation and crisis there would be no revolutions. However, in the past we focused very much on external conditions for revolution, but neglected or ignored necessary subjective conditions for revolution. The success of communist revolution in China was turned into a new ruling system and class in place of the old ones, and the reality of class exploitation and oppression still prevails.

18. In exploring the reasons for ignoring subjective conditions for revolution, we have to turn to the problem of limitation of Marxism.

### **LIMITATION OF MARXISM**

19. According to Marxism, matter is primary and consciousness is secondary. To quote a statement in chapter two of *Communist Manifesto*, “The history of ideologies proves nothing but the fact that intellectual production has always been transformed in accordance with the transformation of material production.” Therefore, it is concluded that once the society has realized public ownership of means of production, people will naturally discard selfish values of individualism generated under private ownership.

20. Unfortunately, history of revolutions in all countries proves that the realization of public ownership of productive means does not automatically result in a revolution of values. On the contrary, ideologies of private ownership continue to erode every corner stone of the revolution, turning the revolution and people’s power into stages for the performance of such ideologies, leading to ultimate transformation of public ownership into private ownership.

The theory proposed by Mao on the necessity of a continuous revolution under proletariat dictatorship implies a recognition of this possibility: “Class struggles between the proletariat and the capitalist, between the two ideologies and between different political forces will be long-lasting, tortuous, and sometimes even very fierce. Proletariat class is bound to transform the world according to its worldview while capitalist class also does the same with theirs. In this respect, victory of socialism over capitalism is not truly guaranteed.”

21. In fact, the essence of struggles between the two classes and worldviews is the confrontation of two value systems — that of altruism and selfish individualism. A class is an interest—oriented social group consisting of people with similar political and economic positions. As long as every individual bases his or her action on self-interest, the society is divided into two classes: the exploiting and the exploited, or capitalists and proletariats. Everyone can use productive means, power, technology or knowledge to serve self-interest, therefore becomes a member of capitalist class and a supporter of class society. And everyone can do the same to serve public interest, therefore becomes a member of proletariat class and a vanguard against class society. If at the time the main body of Chinese

Communist Party had degenerated into a bureaucratic clique, as the chairman of the party Mao could be seen as the number one leader of this clique. Yet in reality Mao was absolutely altruistic, loyal to the people and the ideal of communism. He betrayed bureaucratic clique and single-handedly staged that dynamic Cultural Revolution. That is why this bureaucratic clique restored its power as soon as Mao died in 1976, and staged both at home and abroad a persistent campaign through the media in which Mao was demonized. So capitalism came back to China, turning it into a new economic colony of the United States.

22. In other words, the orientation of an individual's values is not determined by the political and economic status he or she enjoys in society, but the general attitude he or she holds toward the society. In the social, economic and natural food chain, an individual is both exploiting and being exploited, dominating and being dominated. Therefore, he/she can choose to identify with either role: rising against the exploitation or fighting for such a system. Although those who enjoy higher social status are more likely to be guardians of a system of exploitation, those who are at the bottom of the society are not by nature terminators of a system of exploitation. If a member of the proletariat class enjoyed revolution for the purpose of gaining higher social status, he is likely to become a rebuilders of the social system of exploitation once the revolution succeeds and his status becomes higher. A true revolutionist comes more often from middle classes where he is able to grasp a comprehensive view on the society, seeing through the nature of exploitation and promoting altruistic and idealistic values. Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao are such examples.

23. If the above analysis is valid, then a further conclusion would be: communism will never become a reality if as a rule "the superstructure of a society is determined by its economic basis." And a parallel conclusion would be: communism will eventually become a reality if it has been led by an ideological revolution and followed by an institutional revolution. In fact, the Russian Revolution in 1917 and Chinese Revolution in 1949 succeeded because they were initiated, spread out and carried on by ideological revolution, by forming an idealistic organization, and by taking advantage of objective conditions. When ideological revolution stagnates and old ideologies revive, revolution encounters setbacks and old systems are reestablished. So, this Marxist statement should be rewritten as: "the superstructure of a society dominates its economic basis while the latter restrains the former."

24. This description is applicable to both the history of revolution and history of counter-revolution. In 1978, when China's economic system was still under public ownership, a counter-revolution occurred in its superstructure. The so-called "reform and opening-up policy" was actually a policy of restoring capitalism in China. So public ownership was gradually eroded and finally disintegrated. During this process, because of the existence of an economic foundation of public ownership, this counter-revolution had to be carried out under the name of the people, and the slogan of "sticking to four basic principles" had to be shouted time and again. Before the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the country's economic system was basically run by the state. When the bureaucratic clique

in the communist party was determined to forsake socialism, the economic foundation of public ownership crumbled.

25. In reality, this description is also applicable to the history of capitalism. In capitalist society, when the power of social democratic parties and trade unions is strong, the level of exploitation declines since ideological trends are more in favor of workers. Theoretically, there is a possibility that if socialist parties and trade unions become more powerful, if state-run economy further expands, and if capitalists are further confined in terms of their power over private business's benefits, disposing of property and manpower, and decision-making, the nature of economic foundation of society will change. However, the reality is that social democratic parties and trade unions are becoming more and more bureaucratic, thus the fighting spirit of the workers is lowered. As a result, new liberal policies dominate capitalist countries, where trade unions are weakened and social democratic parties have to follow the current in promoting privatization.

26. This description is also true of the history of feudal societies. In middle ages, although big and small lords controlled their land, the king enjoyed more power with which he could weaken or strengthen the power of the lords through staging wars on them. In the closing era of feudal society in Europe, the power of the crown merged with that of the capitalists, gradually weakened the power of feudal lords by means of trade and inflation, and finally rid the ownership of the lords over slaves, annulled tariff between manors, and built a capitalist society.

27. In terms of business, workers are the economic foundation, and capitalists are the superstructure of enterprises. The former limit the extent of action of the latter. When exploitation of capitalists exceeds certain limit, workers will sabotage, quit the job or stage strikes to force them reduce the extent of exploitation. Yet capitalists are in a dominant position and enjoy profits brought by that position.

28. Correspondingly, the relationship between matter and consciousness can also be stated: "consciousness derives from matter that constrains it, yet the former dominates the latter." It is true that individuals' ideas come from experience, from observation and understanding of self and external world, but once ideas are established, they will dominate all human behaviors and acts of transforming the world. Without the active role of consciousness, by now human being will still be living as gregarious animals with no such matters as languages, agricultural technology, buildings and utensils. Because of different ideas, an individual can be a hero or a criminal, can learn to change or adapt to the world, and can be different to other human beings. In terms of materials, communist society will not be very different to other forms of society in that people also have to have shelters, food, utensils and means of transportation, and there will be peoples of different colors experiencing the same life cycles. But what are different are the differences in ideologies that dominate people's action, in the way they organize and communicate with each other, in the way wealth is produced and distributed, and in feelings toward life. That is why communism is a society people are longing for.



29. Since individuals' ideas come from all of their experiences, understanding and consideration, they are to a considerable extent stable, making up characters that are not easy to change. Such characters are formed through individual history and manifested in different acts during different situations and events. So, an individual cannot be judged by his or her single act as a good individual may commit a bad act and a bad individual may commit a good act. If we want to judge an individual accurately, we have to examine all of his or her behaviors, find logical links between them, and analyze them in a way that identifies essence from appearance and truth from falsehood. From the above analysis we can see that when great change occurs in a society, for example the change of private ownership into public ownership, every individual will retain his or her character and consistently display it while adjusting his or her behavior to meet the demand of a new society.

30. That is the best advantage a society dominated by private ownership enjoys. It plants individualism and selfishness deep into adults' mind to the extent that they become the basis for their acts, and enables them to resist, even rebel against the new social system. Compared with such forces, idealism that promotes public ownership and altruism can exert almost no significant influence. When the proletariat class launches a revolution, they are motivated by resistance of oppression rather than idealism. They want to "overthrow landlords and have land of their own." Such a motivation is also self—driven. Only very few leading intellectuals are able to go beyond their own material benefit, betray their own class in search of an ideal society. Thus degeneration of pioneering leaders as a group is only inevitable.

31. If the key to the formation, maintenance, and destruction of a class society is the elimination of the heritage and safeguarding of selfish values, the only conclusion we can draw is that the process of a new classless society coming into being, its consolidation and development must be a process of establishment, promotion, enrichment and consolidation of altruistic values. When confronting real social contradictions, new generations with such values will be able to form enormous and lasting material forces that will not only destroy the old society but also transform old generations into new ones, and together they can build and safeguard a new society.

32. We are sure that some Marxists will disapprove the line of the above analysis. Some of them probably believe that failures of recent revolutions are due to the fact that capitalist relations of production are, at present, still suitable to the level of productivity, so it is the revolutionists' subjective dynamics that enable them to jump over the capitalist valley to bring Russian and China — who were still at the last stage of feudalism — to an undue socialist society. Therefore, these failures should not be seen as the failure of Marxism. These revolutionists failed because they did not follow Marxist theories. In this sense, both the Russian revolution and Chinese revolution were premature of history. We should wait for the progress of globalization and global polarization until time is mature for global proletariat revolution.

33. Such opinions are quite typical in China as well as around the world. In fact they had occurred many times in the history of Chinese revolution. The theory of two—stage

revolution proposed by one of the founders of Chinese Communist Party Chen Duxiu, the new democracy theory appeared in early days of the People's Republic of China, and productivity theory adopted by the Eighth National Congress of Chinese Communist Party are all such examples. Since the beginning of "reform and opening—up policy" in China, royal knights of pen has been defending the revival by bureaucratic clique of capitalism in the name of undergoing a necessary make—up lesson on capitalism.

34. However, such arguments totally erased the roles of class and class struggles, debased the rebellious spirit and force of the class of the oppressed, and ridiculously exaggerated the role of productivity. They are bookish because they cannot be linked to history and reality. If Marx were alive, he would be ashamed of being such a Marxist. Suppose that a communist revolution did happen in Germany in 1918, or suppose it happens in today's United States, the communist party is also likely to degenerate into a bureaucratic clique. Here the question is not really related to the level of productivity, but very closely to the continuation of a stable set of values.

35. As a true revolutionist, Marx would definitely oppose the idea of passively waiting for further development of productivity. Instead, he would advocate full exertion of the dynamics of revolutionary parties. Yet we have to admit that the writings of Marx and Engels leave too much room for revisionists. What is more, Marxism is likely to become detached from revolutionary practice since it does not fully recognize the importance and complexity of ideological revolution. This is a limitation of Marxism.

## **AWAITING INNOVATION AND INTEGRATION OF THEORY OF REVOLUTION**

36. On the occasion of 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Karl Marx, how should we look at the limitation of Marxism? I think there will be two alternatives. One is to deny the limitation of Marxism, putting full blame on later practitioners for the failure of revolution. The other is to admit the limitation of Marxism, innovate and integrate Marxist theory through a summary of international communist revolutionary practice under the guidance of Marxism in the last 150 years, and consequently establish new theories that are more fitting to revolutionary practices and historical rules, thus laying a solid theoretical foundation for the final elimination of capitalism and for true liberation of humanity.

37. I think if he were alive, Marx would choose the second alternative. The best way for us to commemorate him is to choose the second alternative.

38. In order to establish more convincing and visionary theories of revolution, we have to widen our perspectives in examining other theories, doctrines and religions and their practices in historical process, so as to identify on a broader and more solid ground interrelations between politics, economies and cultures. Marx points out that religion is opium for people. In China, the doctrine of the unique importance of productive forces under the name of Marxism has in fact also become opium for people. Same reasoning applies to these two conclusions. When Christianity was used by the oppressed as a weapon to rebel, it

was a spiritual force of mobilization. Yet when its influence gradually grew, and even became the state religion, its leading priests formed a bureaucratic clique and the religion was turned into opium. From this analysis we can see that various theories, doctrines and religions should not be simply accused as ideologies of the ruling class. In fact, traditional schools of thoughts, such as Confucianism, Taoism, and Mohism in China, Platonism in Greece, Buddhism in India, or Christianity in the Europe of middle ages, all had their own social ideals. They contain profound analysis on relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, which is of great use to us. Moreover, these thoughts are not really cultural relics waiting to be labeled, they are very much active in people's mind, and they are part of the sources of their daily thinking. Therefore, a new social revolution led by an ideological revolution has to interact with these theories, drawing upon their nutrition while discarding their stigma of individualism.

39. In light of methodology, *On Contradiction* by Mao Zedong is a most worthy book to read. Somewhat different to Marx's historical materialism, Mao believed that history is not driven by any single pair of opposites that make up a contradiction, e.g., contradiction between Absolute Spirit and real world, or productivity and productive relations. History consists of numerous processes in which countless contradictions interact with each other. Each contradiction has within itself dominating and subordinating parts, and different pairs of contradictions situate in dominating and subordinating relations to each other. So history is a combination of contradictions with abundant and complex layers and structures that are in constant transition. Learning history is to learn the rules of relations among enormous complex contradictions. Only in this way can we build up new theories that can truly explain history and reality, predict and guide the future, and serve the aim of eliminating exploitation and oppression and realization of the ideals of communism.

40. I think that the task of innovating such new theories is incumbent on progressive intellectuals.