Consciousness, Will, and Cultural Revolution in Gramsci and Mao

Germaine A. Hoston, Ph.D.

University of California, San Diego

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the remarkable congruence between the ideas of Antonio Gramsci and Mao Zedong regarding the role of consciousness, human will, and culture in socioeconomic change. These spiritual and humanistic concerns that are central to philosophical idealism were prominent in the young Marx's writings, to which neither had access. Yet both theorists highlighted these elements as powerful, autonomous factors that can impede or accelerate socioeconomic change. It is argued that this congruence is best explained by the intersection of the Italian and Chinese philosophical traditions resulting from the impact of Neo-Confucianism on European idealist philosophy. While their work anticipated the cultural turn in leftist philosophy, it represents a nexus of Chinese and European humanistic and spiritual values that both challenges assumptions regarding the incommensurability of East and West philosophies and reaffirms the continued significance of these concerns for the continuing struggle between democratizing and authoritarian forces.

Keywords: philosophical idealism; Bertrando Spaventa; Ruism, Wang Yangming, Marxism; Antonio Labriola, materialism, Zhu Xi, Neo-Confucianism, Benedetto Croce

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Introduction

How can one account for the consonance of ideas arising in contexts that are geographically and culturally remote from one another? So mused Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) when French Jesuit missionary Joachim Bouvet (1656-1730) informed him of the astonishing resemblance between the *yin-yang* schema in the Chinese classic *Book of Changes* (*Yijing*) and Leibniz's own binary arithmetic system (Mungello 1971, 15-16). As Leibniz learned about Ruism[1] from Bouvet and other missionaries, he became convinced that it was compatible with Christianity (Mungello 1971; Schönfeld 2006). The consonance between Chinese and Western thought confirmed his belief in the fundamental harmony underlying the universe attributable to Divine Providence.

Might the uncanny resemblance between the philosophies of Antonio Gramsci (1891-1936) and Mao Zedong (1893-1976),[2] born within four years of each other over 9,000 kilometers apart, also bear significant implications? There is no evidence of direct influence in either direction for neither is mentioned in the other's writings. Drawn to Marxism for its role in transforming Russia from the "bastion of reaction" in Europe (Engels 1865) to the world's first socialist country, they subscribed to historical materialism. Nevertheless, they emphasized consciousness, will, and culture -- spiritual concerns associated with philosophical idealism – in their thought. Where Marx had held that only "[w]ith the change of the economic foundation [is] the entire immense superstructure more or less rapidly transformed (Marx 1978, 5)," Gramsci and Mao characterized these superstructural elements not as secondary products of socioeconomic trends but rather as autonomous, even causal factors critical to the achievement of socioeconomic change. The resulting philosophies were more humanistic for their focus

[1] This was based on the Jesuits' latinized appellation Kongfuzi (Master Kongzi). The traditional Chinese *Ruism* is now preferred.

[2] Chinese names appear in their traditional Chinese order, with surname followed by given name(s).

on these spiritual factors, even though beyond "Marx's Theses on Feuerbach" (1845) (Femia 1987,7; Wakeman 1973, 223),[3] neither theorist had access to the young Marx's writings as a rebellious Young Hegelian (Avineri 1968), lost until recovered in Moscow in the early 1930s (Held 1980). Meanwhile, Nikolai Bukharin's *Historical Materialism* and (co-authored with Yevgeny Preobrazhensky) *The ABC of Communism,* based on Engels's mechanistic "Socialism: Utopian and Scientific," became the primary vehicles for dissemination of Marxism. These, with Joseph Stalin's *Foundations of Leninism*, dominated the understanding of Marxism in China (Hoston 1994:118-119). Italian Marxists perused a broader range of writings including those of German "orthodox" and "revisionist" Marxists Karl Kautsky and Eduard Bernstein respectively and French anarcho-syndicalist-influenced Georges Sorel. They also read German idealist philosophers from Leibniz to Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) as well as Italian philosophers from Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) to Bertrando Spaventa (1817-1883) and Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) (Grilli 1941, 358-369). Despite these differences, Gramsci and Mao both elevated these idealist concerns, culminating in their emphasis on the importance of culture, its autonomy from socioeconomic forces, and cultural transformation as key to achieving socioeconomic change.[4]

Few have noted such similarities in the Gramsci literature. His first English biographer noted only that Mao's views are "quite Gramscian in nature (Cammett 1967, 177n.)." Neither Adamson (1980) nor

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[3] Gramsci refers briefly to a French translation of "Marx's Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right:* Introduction" (1844) but may not have read the actual text, since no page numbers or passages are cited (2024k, 3062). A five-page excerpt from the conclusion of "On the Jewish Question" is cited with extensive omissions in *Quarderno* 7 (Gramsci, 2024k, 2390).

[4] It should be noted that the Mao's pre-1949 theoretical insights are being evaluated here on their own terms, in relation to Gramsci's ideas, and not in the context of the invocation of them in the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" from 1966 to 1976.

Femia (1981) notes the resemblance. Todd proposes potential comparisons (1974); Kang asserts a connection only with regard to literary criticism (1997, 70); and Dirlik's comparison focuses solely on party leadership (2005, 207). I suggestively compare "[t]he centrality of consciousness to Mao's vision of the Chinese Revolution" with Gramsci's emphasis on ideological hegemony in civil society in advanced capitalist societies. She argues that the CCP effectively created a Gramscian "alternative hegemony, a new people, a new popular consciousness and new social mores" in its base areas (1994, 388-389). None of these studies, however, analyzes the shared elements of Gramsci's and Mao's philosophies as idealist or questions whether the similarities were serendipitous or have deeper, historical roots.

This study addresses precisely these issues. One could hypothesize that the centrality of consciousness, will, and culture in Mao and Gramsci is attributable to common contexts as late industrializing societies. Both were once mighty empires in which Ruism and Roman Catholicism respectively defined *culture* or c*ivilization*. Regret over lost greatness was palpable in Gramsci's nineteenth-century predecessors, as the imperfect Risorgimento left Italy less socioeconomically developed than Germany and France, which boasted philosophical achievements that eclipsed Italian contributions to the Enlightenment. In China, a similar sense of loss produced the cultural iconoclasm of the New Culture movement that led to the founding of the CCP. Many Chinese intellectuals concluded that change must begin with transformation of the Chinese mind-and-heart (心 *xin*) (Hoston 1990), yet, while criticizing Ruism as feudalistic, Mao praised China's "splendid old culture" as the cradle of its "new culture (Mao 1965c, 381)."

Accordingly, uneven development was highlighted by both theorists. The stark disparity between Italy's urban industrial center and Gramsci's native Sardinia left him preoccupied with the "Southern Question" and relations between workers and peasants in late-industrializing societies (Gramsci 1957; Gramsci 1977c, 83). Likewise, Mao lamented the unevenness of "China's economic, political and cultural development (1967c, 313)" and was among the first to recognize the potential for peasant-based revolution there (1967h). For both, Marxism became a vehicle for achieving modernity, ensuring moral

equivalency with more advanced Western societies. Yet these similarities cannot explain the common imprint of philosophical idealism on their thought because such idealism is also found in advanced capitalist societies (e.g., England) and is notably absent in other late industrializers (such as Russia). Building upon the work of Grilli (1941), Piccone (1977 [1983]), and Vacca (2017) on Italy and Wakeman (1973), Schwartz (1996), and Hoston (1994; 2024a; 2024b) on China, this study argues that it is the direct and indirect influence of philosophical idealism on Gramsci and Mao that explains the confluence of their ideas regarding consciousness, will, and cultural revolution. Each theorist was inspired by indigenous philosophical legacies -- Neo-Confucianism, especially Wang Yangming's (1472-1529) idealism in China -- and in Wang's contemporary Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), Vico, and their successors in Italy. Below I reconstruct a genealogy of these ideas, which emerged by incorporation of Chinese philosophy, through the Leibniz-Wolff school, into the idealism of Kant, Hegel, and the young Marx (Schönfeld 2006; Hoston 2024a). Marx and especially Engels subsequently overcorrected Hegelian idealism by misapprehending culture -- and ideology -- as determined by economic forces. Nonetheless, in the absence of the young Marx's writings, Gramsci had indirect – and Mao direct – access to the key components of Neo-Confucian idealism emphasizing consciousness, will, and culture. This argument is supported by three findings:

1. Mao and Gramsci shared an appreciation of the unity of theory and practice expressed by a revolutionary party whose members incarnate a common will.
2. Their view that culture is sufficiently autonomous from economic forces to impede or promote socioeconomic progress reflected a shared understanding of human relations shaped historically by human will and consciousness.
3. The problem of hegemony – redefined by Gramsci as influence exercised by established philosophical and cultural patterns (as opposed to the dominant position of one group in a political coalition) – was related to his and Mao's shared belief in the reciprocal influence between the socioeconomic base and superstructure of society. Mao did not use the Chinese

term for *hegemony* (*baquan* 霸权) -- denoting domination by might not right -- but he recognized the robust persistence of traditional beliefs and conduct, and, like Gramsci, identified cultural revolution as necessary to combat it.

The result was Gramsci's Italianized Marxism and Mao's "Sinification" of Marxism (1938), which echoed the idealism and humanism of the young Marx and the Neo-Confucian tradition. More importantly, their insights not only challenge the alleged polarity between Eastern and Western thought but have contemporary significance. They suggest how traditional cultural patterns can inhibit progress and nurture anxiety-driven attachments to authoritarian and fascist forces; conversely, a new cultural hegemony based on the view that change is a foundational, necessary, and salutary force can promote not liberationist socioeconomic change.

Philosophical Roots of Gramsci's Philosophy

When socialism began to attract Italian intellectuals in the 1870s, an eclectic variety of Italian Marxist views soon emerged. As positivism and social Darwinism impelled the proliferation of economic determinist versions of Marxism throughout Europe, Achille Loria (1902) formulated one of the earliest such expositions thereof in Italy. Then, when irrationalism and revulsion against bourgeois society rose in Europe, Antonio Labriola (1843-1904), introduced to Marxism by his student Benedetto Croce, responded with an anti-deterministic Hegelian interpretation of Marxism. Labriola's significance for Gramsci is attributable to: (1) his characterization of Marxism as "the philosophy of praxis;" and (2) the influence of Labriola's mentor Bertrando Spaventa on Labriola's idealist interpretation of Marxism. Together Labriola, Croce, and Sorel (who published Labriola's work in French) were associated with Marxism in the public mind -- until, that is, Croce published his first essay criticizing historical materialism.[5] Thenceforth,

[5] Probably the third of seven essays, entitled "Essai d'interprétation et de critique de quelques concepts du marxisme [An interpretation and critique of some concepts in Marxism] (Croce 1921, "Preface", ix n.)

Labriola was no longer the "founder of Italian revolutionary socialism, but merely" Croce's equal (Jacobitti 1975:311), as Croce became "the intellectual leader of the revisionist tendencies of the 1890s" (Gramsci 2024g, 1207, all translations mine unless otherwise indicated).

The Bolshevik Revolution altered the socialist discourse in Italy dramatically. While the Second International focused on achieving revolution in an advanced capitalist society, the Russian developments suggested to Gramsci that Marxism could be a vehicle for achieving modernity in Italy (Gramsci 1977a; Gramsci 2024e, 1523-1530). Because of the centrality of consciousness and the historical role of Russian revolutionary intellectuals in Lenin's conceptualization of the vanguard party (Lenin 1975), Gramsci is often regarded as "Leninist." However, far more consequential for understanding his similarities to Mao is Gramsci's Italian philosophical heritage.

Gramsci's Idealist Heritage

Croce and his Idealist Predecessors

In China, Neo-Confucian idealism dated back to the eleventh century and upheld the Ruist "Mandate of Heaven" (*Tianming*) myth that legitimated imperial rule until 1911. There were so few materialists in the Chinese philosophical tradition that historical materialism seemed genuinely novel there. The history of idealism in Italy was much shorter but no less significant for Gramsci. The prominence of Labriola's Neo-Hegelian teacher (and Croce's uncle) Spaventa marked the apogee of idealist philosophy in Italy. Although Croce became interested in Hegel only after studying Marxism, for him, idealism was not the product of a distant past, and his call for its revival fed the Italian anti-positivist appetite.

It would be easy to exaggerate Croce's impact upon Gramsci's thought. To be sure, Gramsci was influenced by Croce despite Croce's dismissal of historical materialism as a "mere canon of interpretation" and not the "philosophical science of economics it purported to be (Croce 1921, xiii)." Gramsci devotes over one hundred fifty pages to Croce in the *Prison Notebooks*, comprising his "Anti-

Croce" critique (Gramsci 2024g, 1234). There, he acknowledges his previous "Crocean idealist tendencies" and his conviction that "as Hegelianism had provided the premise for the philosophy of praxis[6] in the nineteenth century, . . . Crocean philosophy could be the premise for a renewal of the philosophy of praxis . . . for our generation (2024g, 1233)." Yet Croce erred in abandoning Marxism's promise as revolutionary thought and was intellectually dishonest in failing to recognize the "trace[s] of the philosophy of praxis" in his own thought (2024g, 1232). Far from fulfilling his promise to "liquidate" it, Croce's critique of Marxism was "contradictory and inconsistent (Gramsci 2024d, 1060)."

Insofar as Croce's *Spirit* referred to the human mind and for him history was a process in which thought, will, and culture played a decisive role, these views did contribute to Gramsci's humanism. However, Croce's articulation of these elements cannot explain how the themes of consciousness, voluntarism, and cultural revolution came to be shared by Gramsci and Mao. It is only in the broader historical tapestry of Italian philosophy that we can discern the threads tying Gramsci's and Mao's philosophies together.

From Vico to Spaventa: Neo-Confucian Influences in Italian Thought

Vico is not regarded as an idealist, but his *Scienza Nuova* [New Science] (1725) based on the *verum/factum* principle, anticipated views of his idealist successors. Rejecting Descartes's insistence upon verification through observation of the natural world, Vico claimed he neglected both the social nature of human beings and the practical wisdom implanted in them by God, reflected in institutions they developed in interaction with each other (Vico 1984, §2 ("Idea of the Work"), 3-4). We can discern in these points regarding the nature and inherent wisdom of human beings an echo of Ruism (see *infra*), with which Vico was familiar (32-33, para. 50). Vico's claim that societies rise and fall in historical cycles

[6] Gramsci used this term in the *Prison Notebooks* as an indirect referent for Marxism (to avoid censorship) but also to refer to Labriola's Marxism.

echoed the Ruist view of dynastic cycles; and his historical schema attributed a significant role to culture, central to Ruism but denigrated by Cartesians as full of uncertainty. Vico warned that culture could be a trap condemning us to constant repetition of our errors and that culture must be changed if we are to escape that snare. As in Ruism, where the cyclical perspective is accompanied by a secular vision of progress from Disorder (*Luan*), through Approaching Peace (*Kang*), to Universal Peace (*Taiping*), Vico's perspective offered hope for escape from the constant return (*ricorso*) to a barbaric past (paras. 1104-1106).

Following Vico, Spaventa established the nexus among philosophy, culture, and a sense of national purpose with universalistic implications. His discussions of consciousness, will, and culture bore the most fruitful seeds of Gramsci's thought. As Vico correctly recognized, Spaventa asserted, not only the natural world, but the human and the spiritual world must be understood philosophically. Yet theologians had denigrated the world, while positivists neglected its human and spiritual dimensions (Spaventa 1868, 490-500). Thus, where Hegel blamed Jean-Jacques Rousseau's (1712-1778) "abstract" social contract theory for the "terrible and horrific" French Revolution (1821, para. 258, 297), Spaventa insisted that philosophers played an invaluable role in history provided "the philosophical idea" involved "articulates only the essence and principles of the movements of history (Spaventa [1851] 1963, 74)." Accordingly, hailing the Risorgimento as an attempt to replicate German unification, Spaventa endorsed Neo-Hegelianism as a liberalizing and democratic force therein.

Of particular note here is Spaventa's thesis regarding the "circulation of philosophy" from Italy to Northern Europe and back. Vico, who "intuit[ed] the idea of spirit thereby creating the philosophy of history," was "the true precursor of all German [philosophy] (Spaventa 1972, 31)," including Hegel's idealism (Spaventa 1908, 3). Tracing Descartes's and Spinoza's ideas back to Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) and Tommaso Campanella (1568-1639), Spaventa – an ordained priest -- maintained that Italian philosophy had deteriorated under the repressive domination of the Church, now merged with the state, but Italian Renaissance ideas "went on to develop in free lands and among freer intellects" to the north.

Therefore, "[i]t is not our philosophers of the last two centuries, but Spinoza, Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel who are the true disciples of Bruno, of Vanini, of Campanella, of Vico and other illustrious authors (Spaventa 1867, xxi)."

Spaventa contributed four essential elements to Gramsci: 1) the importance of critical analysis of any specific national context, viewed as part of universal history; 2) the view that intellectual works and culture are spiritual products with a significant impact on history; 3) the observation that the Church's reliance upon the state to enforce its judgments rendered it the most powerful negative cultural force in Italy; and 4) the solution to this problem being the reversal of this repression by the Church-*cum*-State. This prescription for cultural transformation, for the "Hegelianization of Italian culture," became Spaventa's mission. It failed amidst entrenched Catholic perspectives that greeted Hegelians with suspicion, persecution, and exile (Piccone 1977, 48-49), but Spaventa's work consistently highlighted the role of human will, particularly a unified common will, in generating – and determining the success or failure – of political action (Spaventa 1972, 77, 79, 91, 107, 174).

It is difficult to overstate the significance of these ideas for Gramsci's thought (cf., Labriola 2003, 378). Labriola claimed that the philosophy of praxis "ends every form of idealism (1918, 55)," but his writings reflect Spaventian idealism. Labriola claimed that the essence of Marxism is the unity of theoretical and practical activities, as opposed to Hegel's singular focus on consciousness. Unlike Loria, who depicted the superstructure of society as the direct, unmediated product of its material basis (Loria 1902, 36), Labriola depicted history as a series of "social forms" in which "economics is mediated by and determines thought only in the final analysis (Labriola 1902, p. 36)." Through their relations of production, human beings contribute to the (re)creation of the economic basis; therefore, human will is involved in the making of history (Labriola 1918, 54). Croce's evocation of Spaventa's arguments regarding Italy's place in world history during World War I endowed Croce with "pope-like" influence (Gramsci 2024j, 1303). If Croce refused to wield it to support the revolutionary movement, Gramsci would do so himself.

Idealist Elements in Gramsci's Thought

Croce's centering of the human spirit was significant for Gramsci, but its limitations prompted Gramsci to return to Croce's predecessors. Croce's philosophy is represented schematically below:

Spirit's [Self-]Consciousness+Will=History (of the Spirit)=Philosophy

The Spirit's action is fragmented between theoretical activity (aesthetics and logic) and practical activity (economics and ethics). For Croce, the autonomy of culture (aesthetics) refers to its independence from political economy, which makes no sense for Gramsci, for whom "[e]verything is political, even philosophy (Gramsci 2024c, 886)." Although Croce proclaims the importance of immanentism – lived human experience – Gramsci concludes that it is not Croce's philosophy but Marxism that, "having eliminated transcendence," is "an absolute historical humanism (2024i, 1437)."

Gramsci thus returned to Spaventa, whose observation that our "[m]aterial existence is . . . the necessary condition of our worldly life and the beginning of all development (1867, 76)" rendered him and Labriola illustrious exemplars for Gramsci's "materialism perfected by the work of [idealist] speculative philosophy merged with humanism (Gramsci 2024h, 1250)." While material forces and social relations in the economic basis of society certainly affect the content of the superstructure, Gramsci insists that the interaction between the base and superstructure – conceptualized as a "historical bloc" (*blocco storico*), a unity between nature and the spirit -- is reciprocal. "[T]he material forces are the content and ideology the form," Gramsci asserts, but this "distinction between form and content [is] merely didactic, because material forces would not be conceivable historically without form, and ideologies would be mere individual whims without material forces (2024c, 869)."

This formulation is strikingly similar to the description of the relationship between universal Principle/Reason and Material Force (Matter) by Neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi (1130-1200). Although the two combined to form the various things in the universe and logically Principle/Reason

existed first, they are inseparable: “Principle/Reason exists within Material Force. Without Material Force, Principle/Reason would have nothing to which to adhere (Zhu [1270]).” The consonance with Gramsci’s statement seems hardly fortuitous, given the transmission of Zhu’s ideas to Italy by Catholic missionaries and the Leibniz-Wolff School. Indeed, Gramsci cites Eduard Erkes’s book describing Zhu as “the most significant figure in China after Confucius,” “the person who remolded modern Chinese consciousness (2024l, 561)” and highlighting the role of human will in Ruism, as opposed to the Daoist doctrine of non-action, “non-intervention of the will (2024l, 562-563).”

Gramsci, following Croce, would not accept Principle/Reason as transcendent; but Zhu’s view that this intangible force exists within matter coincides with Gramsci’s insistence that the will and consciousness cannot be excised from economic relations of production. After declaring, “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but . . . their social being that determines their consciousness (Marx 1978, 4),” Marx, in his theory of revolution, described how the relations of production become fetters upon the further development of the forces of production, arguing that *ideology* refers to the “legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic . . . forms in which men become conscious of this conflict (1978, 5).” Gramsci inquires, “Is this consciousness limited only to the conflict between the material forces of production and the relations of production . . . or does it refer to . . . every bit of conscious knowledge (2024i, 1492; 2024b, 455)?” Clearly Gramsci absorbed Labriola’s “doctrine of causation mediated by one’s state of consciousness (Pastore, 2:3)” when arguing that human beings must be “conceptualized as a historical bloc of purely individual, subjective, . . . elements and objective or material elements with which the individual is in active relationship.” Social development occurs when humans “transform the external world and their relationships with each other” on the basis of a concrete will (2024h, 1338). Therefore, while technically part of the economic basis of society, the formation of relations of production is “not a mechanical, but rather active and conscious (2024h, 1345)” process implicating the will.

This assertion is clearly influenced by Spaventa's recognition that philosophy must address "the practical needs of life (1972, 76-77)." Gramsci avers that "in the final analysis [the will] equals practical or political activity." The unity of theory and practice renders Marxism "the philosophy of the act (praxis), but not of [Giovanni Gentile's] 'pure act,' rather of the 'impure' act, that is, real [activity] in the profane sense of the word (2024b, 453)." While Croce attributed that perspective to Vico, Gramsci claims it for historical materialism (2024d, 1060), repudiating "vulgar materialists" who believe in "historical laws," failing to recognize "that the intervention of the will is useful for reconstruction . . . of the social order (2024i, 1611)." For Gramsci, superstructural elements are not mere "appearances," as Croce claimed (2024g, 1224). Rather, citing Marx on the strength of "popular beliefs (Gramsci 2024d, 869)," Gramsci insists that such intangible factors are themselves material forces. Hence the need to target traditional forms and ideas that resist change from the outset of the revolutionary process; for few believe "that if the socioeconomic base changes, all the elements of the corresponding superstructure must necessarily collapse (2024h, 1322)."

This explains Gramsci's emphasis on *culture* – a concept that encapsulates all these spiritual elements. The fuzziness in his boundary between state and civil society reflects the Italian experience with the Vatican, culminating in his thesis that a socialist revolution in an advanced capitalist country with a complex civil society – in contrast to 1917 Russia's weak and "gelatinous" one -- requires the development of an "alternative hegemony" to replace the existing ideological hegemony. The latter, powered by "consent" rather than coercion, constitutes a secondary bulwark behind the front lines, rendering a frontal attack on the coercive state apparatus futile (2024j, 1614; 2024c, 865-866). Since Catholic hegemony remains robust, Gramsci advocates the creation of "new," "organic" intellectuals (2024i, 1407; 2024e, 1513-1524) from the working classes to constitute the "Modern Prince," the revolutionary party incarnating a shared revolutionary will (2024i, 1558-1561), to "combat modern ideologies in their most refined form, establish its own group of independent intellectuals, and educate the

popular masses, whose culture is medieval." Following Spaventa, Gramsci stresses that radical change requires transformation of that "culture of a narrow intellectual aristocracy (2024f, 1858)."

These ideas were also influenced by Gramsci's observations regarding new developments in capitalist society. In particular, he referred to Fordism, which he understood not just as the novel system of mass production implemented by the American industrialist in his factories but more broadly as a new epoch of economic rationalization that was possible in a country lacking the remnants of feudal relations. These innovations would certainly alter class relations, creating potentially new forms of knowledge and even new understandings of the self that could equip the working class with consciousness as a new collective human *being* -- to replace the atomistic individualism of bourgeois society -- necessary to lead a socialist society (Gramsci 2024a, 2139-2147, 2164-2175). Unfortunately, Europe, especially later industrializers like Italy, as well as China and India in Asia, retained elements of previous social formations that impeded such industrial rationalization and consciousness among the working class. Therefore, Gramsci identifies culture, sustained within civil society – including education, deployed to counter the existing hegemony with its burden of obsolete ideas from earlier economic formations – as a crucial front of the revolutionary movement.

Gramsci was correct to note, even in passing, China's backwardness. Well after the end of the last dynasty, the Qing, the influence of its philosophical basis persisted in Chinese consciousness. There Mao would develop a similar appreciation of the potential autonomy of the same spiritual elements emphasized by Gramsci.

Mao's Idealist Philosophical Heritage

China's Idealist Philosophical Tradition

In the early twentieth century, historical materialism rapidly emerged as the dominant strain of Western thought in China. Mao, son of a peasant turned grain trader, studied Western works in translation

at teacher's college but lacked Gramsci's background in European philosophy. The term *idealism* (*weixin-zhuyi* 唯心主义) appears fewer than a dozen times in Mao's writings prior to the late 1930s, where he equated it with subjectivism (*zhuguan-zhuyi* 主观主义), a "deviation" denounced by Bukharin and Stalin (Mao 1990, 114) consisting of underestimating objective material conditions (Mao 1995a, 202-203; Mao 1995b, 237; Mao, 1995d, 421-422). To Mao, idealism was the opposite of historical materialism, "substitute[ing] consciousness, spirit or concepts for objective entities [that] exist independently of human consciousness." Mao dismissed it as "religious doctrine (1990b, 88-89)," just as Gramsci lamented that "idealism is intrinsically theological (2024h, 1240)."

Although Mao was critical of his philosophical heritage, Ruism had so permeated Chinese culture for millennia that even a devotee of historical materialism could hardly avoid interpreting Marxism through its lens. After his clashes with the CCP leadership resulting in his removal from the Central Executive Committee in 1925, Mao could ill-afford to cite ideas associated with the "feudalistic ideology" of the old regime. Instead, he quoted Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin in his competition with his Russian-educated rivals. Careful perusal of his writings, however, reveals significant influence of Neo-Confucianism (Hoston 2024b).

Despite the conventional distinction between the two major Neo-Confucian schools – Zhu's Rationalist School and Wang's Idealist School -- both schools are actually idealist. Ancient Ruists believed that the mind-and-heart (*xin* 心, incorporating both cognitive and affective functions) is the means by which we cognize the world, including the Will of Heaven ([Kongzi] 1971, 2:4, 146). Therefore, Kongzi (c. 551-c. 479 BCE) identified the key to ending the murderous disorder of his time in the obligation of all human beings to engage in the self-cultivation of virtue. The *Great Learning* states:

> The ancients who wished to manifest their clear character to the world would first establish order in their states. Those who wished to establish order in their states would first regulate their families. Those who wished to regulate their families would first cultivate their personal lives.

> Those who wished to cultivate their personal lives would first rectify their minds-and-hearts. Those who wished to rectify their minds-and-hearts would first make their wills sincere. Those who wished to make their wills sincere would first extend their knowledge. The extension of knowledge consists in the investigation of things. . . . From the Son of Heaven down to the common people, everyone must regard the cultivation of oneself as the root or foundation (*Great Learning* 1971, 357-359).

This startlingly modern assertion holds that it is the responsibility of all individuals to cultivate the virtues of humanity/humaneness, righteousness/justice, propriety/deference, and wisdom ([Mengzi] 1971, 2A:6, 201-203). This vision encapsulates the notions of *culture* and *civilization* because disorder, barbarism, resulted from the failure of individuals to cultivate them. The issue of how to interpret this crucial passage regarding self-cultivation is what would separate the two Neo-Confucian schools.

The Rationalist School of Zhu Xi

Kongzi's idealism was rendered even more spiritual with the incorporation of Daoist and Buddhist perspectives into Neo-Confucianism. Remarkably, Zhou Dunyi's (1017-1073) conceptualization of the cosmogony that undergirded the new formulation was materialist. Zhou adopted the ancient concept of the Great Ultimate (*Taiji*) -- the origin of everything in the universe -- as something with physical form, generating the various things in the universe through continuous conflict between the female, quiescent *yin* and masculine, active *yang* forces depicted in the *Book of Changes*. Zhu Xi modified Zhou's view to incorporate both intangible Principle/Reason and Material Force (Chan 1963, 590), and that dualistic reinterpretation became official Neo-Confucian orthodoxy.

Consciousness (*shi* 识) is implicated in Ruism because one must become aware of Heaven's commands in order to obey them. Although Neo-Confucians denounce Buddhists for devaluing human relationships, the singular influence of Chinese Buddhism on the re-imagination of Ruism is undeniable.

The Mahayana text *The Lotus Sutra* attributes greater merit and access to enlightenment to laypersons than to ascetic monks, offering a Buddhism more compatible with traditional Ruist values. It also claims that the historical Buddha was but one of innumerable manifestations of a single eternal Buddha with a single, authentic Buddha mind (Soothill 1987, 136).

This idea is echoed in the Neo-Confucian concept of a single universal Principle/Reason that explains the coherence of the entire universe. It is manifested in the specific reason/principle that is the essence -- the *noumenon* -- of every material thing that exists. According to Zhu, universal Principle/Reason is pure, but Material Force (*Qi* 气) has impurities; therefore, any given physical thing (*qi* 器) created from the union of Principle/Reason with Material Force – i.e., any *phenomenon*, including any human being – inevitably falls short of its noumenal essence. Hence the need for self-cultivation. How is that to be accomplished? Citing Mengzi (372-289 BCE) (6A.7-8, 406-408), Zhu argued that when the mind-and-heart is unperturbed by external objects, it is "in a harmonious equilibrium (*Doctrine of the Mean*, chap. 1, pp. 384-385)." However, once the mind-and-heart is aroused by external things, human beings must purposefully seek the moral mind-and-heart. By examining the myriad external things (*gewu* 格物) to identify their individual principles, eventually one will understand universal Principle/Reason (Chan 1963a, 610).

Zhu's contemporary Lu Xiangshan (1139-1192) rejected this prescription. Lu reinterpreted Mengzi's claim that the human mind-and-heart is innately good (*liangzhi*) (6A, 7-8) to refer to knowledge of the good inherent in the mind-and-heart. Therefore, self-cultivation is not onerous, as Zhu claimed, but quite simple, since "Principle is endowed in me by Heaven, not drilled into me from without." Indeed, "the mind-and-heart and Principle can never be separated into two (Lu [1753])." Lu's views did not prevail over Zhu's, but they would be revived by Wang Yangming four centuries later.

The Idealist School of Wang Yangming

Wang earnestly endeavored to implement Zhu's self-cultivation methodology as a child but failed (Wang 2016, 294-295). After years of government service, Wang realized that self-cultivation must begin from within the mind-and-heart (174). Zhu, he concluded, completely misconstrued the term *gewu:* It meant not "examining" external things, but rather "rectifying" incorrect things *within* the mind-and-heart (128, 157). Three elements of Wang's idealism contributed to Mao's thought: (1) innate knowledge of the good; (2) the unity of knowledge and practice; and (3) the importance of the will.

Citing Mengzi, Wang agrees with Lu regarding the innate knowledge of the good, since all individuals "have a mind-and-heart that cannot bear to see [others] suffer ([Mengzi] 1971 2A:6, 201)" and thereby possess the "beginnings" of the four cardinal virtues (6A:6, 401-403). Evil arises when individuals are distracted by their desires and aversions and lose their original mind-and-heart (6A:9, 408); but our original nature enables us to assess our innate knowledge ourselves, without relying upon external things or authorities. Hence Mengzi's assertion that "everyone can be a [sage king] Yao or Shun ([Mengzi] 1971, 6B:2, 424; Wang 2016, 295)." Since the original nature is implanted in us by Heaven, Mengzi continued, "He who exerts his mind-and-heart to the utmost knows his nature, [. . . and] he who knows his nature knows Heaven (7A:1, 448)." Thus, Wang insists that the mind-and-heart is the Dao (Way), which is Heaven (Wang 2016, 175). Since there is "only one Mind-and-Heart" (159), identical to universal Principle/Reason (143), self-cultivation must begin within the mind-and-heart, the storehouse of our innate knowledge of the good. Zhu's method failed because it prescribed seeking Principle/Reason in the wrong place.

Since Wang invokes Mengzi's emphasis on sincerely "examining oneself (*Mengzi* 1971, 7A:4, 450-451)," his philosophy is phenomenological: One explores one's own consciousness in order to preserve – or regain -- Heavenly Principle via the innate faculty (Wang 2016, 145). Wang concludes that self-cultivation is "effortless," but that is an exaggeration because the will plays a crucial role. Since it can be directed towards or away from the Way of Heaven, one must first "make the will sincere." Because

Wang equates sincerity with the innate knowledge of the good (2016, 319), he concludes that the *Great Learning* describes a single undertaking – "the *rectification* of things [within the mind-and-heart], which consists in making the will sincere (Wang 2016, 142, 294-295, 200; emphasis added)."

Inasmuch as this endeavor engages consciousness, it is a social consciousness that one cannot cultivate alone because of Wang's teaching regarding the unity of theory and practice (*zhixing heyi*). Self-cultivation cannot be accomplished without action. Even if one sincerely loves the good known by one's innate faculty, if one fails to "love the people" (*qinmin*), to manifest humanity to others, his innate knowledge of the good is incomplete because he has not rectified his mind-and-heart. Understanding the virtues requires practicing them in one's relations with others. This is self-transformation through social (inter)action (Wang 2016, 156, 199).

Finally, Wang rejects Zhu's epistemology and self-cultivation method for its dualisms between Principle/Reason and Material Force and – foreshadowing Vico's anti-Cartesianism -- between the mind-and-heart as the subject of examination of external things as objects (Wang 2016, 1:128). Zhu acknowledged, "Knowledge and action always require each other," but "we must first know before we can act (Chan, 1963a, 609)." Consequently, Wang blames Zhu's philosophy for immobilism among intellectuals who hesitate to act until they are certain they have attained sufficient knowledge of Principle/Reason through the investigation of things. Since they "believe that they must know before they can act, . . . for their entire lives they will never act, and they will also never know. . . . (Wang 2016, 1:126-27)." Here Wang articulated a pre-Marxian "philosophy of *praxis*" that would influence Mao.

Idealist Elements in Mao Zedong

Interestingly, Mao does not characterize Neo-Confucianism as philosophical idealism (1990b, 106; 1990a, 155). Therefore, while employing analogies to Chinese concepts such as contradictions (*maodun)* between *yin* and *yang* to explain dialectical materialism, Mao portrays Marxism-Leninism as alien to the Chinese philosophical tradition. Dialectical materialism emerged in Europe from "the practice

of the proletariat" thereby becoming "a thoroughly systematic and completely new world view and methodology (Mao 1990b, 92)," he asserts. Having "assimilated all the results of the entire history of humanity," it is "the revolutionary weapon of the proletariat." Yet Mao attributes autonomy and influence to consciousness and philosophy, ironically concluding that the Chinese revolution must struggle against China's "ancient philosophical legacy," which is useless for responding to modern exigencies (92-95).

That statement is itself idealist, for it suggests not only that replacing traditional Chinese philosophy thought with Marxism can transform China's destiny, but also that the "ideological struggle" is decisive. For Mao, this means that the superstructure has sufficient autonomy to impede socioeconomic change and that cultural transformation – transformation of the mind-and-heart – is the key to changing – to saving – China. Here, Mao echoes the idealism of both Wang and the young Marx, who claimed that that proletariat was the key to emancipating Germany, a country that had not even completed a bourgeois-democratic revolution. This operation seemed to begin and end with the mind-and-heart: "*Philosophy* is the *head* of this emancipation; the *proletariat* is its *heart*. Philosophy can only be realized by the [sublation] (*Aufhebung*) of the proletariat, and the proletariat can only be sublated [*aufheben*] by the realization of philosophy (Marx 1976, 391)."

Mao on Knowledge/Consciousness and Praxis

Unfamiliar with that text, Mao struggles to understand consciousness in materialist terms. Rejecting "vulgar materialism," he echoes Wang (2016, 296) in asserting that consciousness cannot be reduced to biological functions (1990b, 113). Mao's description of historical materialism seems simply to replace, mechanistically, the Neo-Confucian *Principle/Reason* with *matter* ("Matter exists eternally and universally and is limitless in both time and space."). He then defines consciousness as a "matter in motion," eliminating -- as Wang did with regard to Zhu's thought -- the duality between knowledge and existence, between subject and object (1990b, 103-104). Yet how could one declare the distinction between knowledge/consciousness and matter null and void once cognition has taken place (1990b, 98)?

Is not the development of knowledge/consciousness ongoing? Mao recognizes consciousness as the "product of social practice (1990b, 122)," but he does not explain the relationship between historical materialism and the development of revolutionary consciousness in a country that has not experienced the practice that engendered dialectical materialism. This he would undertake in "On Practice" and "On Contradiction."

These works provide definitive evidence of the incorporation of Neo-Confucian idealism into Mao's philosophy. Mao draws from both Neo-Confucian schools to address the relationship between the universal and the particular and between knowledge/theory and *praxis*. Clearly influenced by Zhu's epistemology, he describes how one proceeds from perception of phenomena to understanding them through "logical knowledge" (theory) about the development of the surrounding world in its totality (Mao 1967e, 298; cf., 1967c, 320-321), i.e., universal Principle/Reason (cf., Hoston 2024b, 613). Next, reflecting Wang's influence, Mao insists that the development of knowledge is inseparable from practice: "If you want knowledge, you must take part in the practice of changing reality (Mao 1967e, 299)." Marxism itself is the product of practical experience in capitalist society obtained by Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin (298); and we know Marxist theory is correct because it has been proven by the experience of the CCP (Mao 1995d, 421). In short, Chinese practice validates Marxist theory.

Thus, Mao cites Lenin's proclamation, "Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement (Mao 1967c, 336)," yet he stresses that theory is important "only because it can guide action (Mao 1967e, 304)." His description of the dynamic between theory/knowledge and practice resembles the upward spiral of Hegel's dialectic: "Start from perceptual knowledge and actively develop it into rational knowledge; then . . . actively guide revolutionary practice to change both the subjective and the objective world. Practice, knowledge, again practice, and again knowledge (1967e, 308)." This confirms Mao's suggestion above that Marxism-Leninism is "incomplete" until validated through practice (305). Just as each national experience is a "moment" in the unfolding of the universal for Gramsci, Mao argues that Chinese revolutionary practice can render Marxism more complete, more universal. This

reasoning seems to combine Zhu's epistemology of spontaneous understanding of the universal through practical observation of the particular with Wang's *filosofia di praxis*, to borrow Labriola's (and Gramsci's) term.

Who is to engage in this practice and theorization? Lenin accepted Kautsky's view that "'the vehicle of science is not the proletariat, but the *bourgeois intelligentsia,*'" who created socialist theory, disputing Marx's and Engels's assumption that proletarian class consciousness arises directly from *praxis* in production and class conflict (Marx and Engels 1978, 480-481). Mao explicitly refers to Lenin's *What Is To Be Done* (Mao 1967c, 336), where Lenin insisted, "Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers *only from without*, that is, only from outside the economic struggle, from outside the sphere of relations between workers and employers (1975, 50)." However, Mao, like Gramsci, elects not to quote that passage (1978b, 288). Gramsci asserts instead that "all are intellectuals" whether they have intellectual occupations or not (Gramsci 2024e, 1516). He also distinguishes "traditional intellectuals" -- who, like the Jesuits criticized by Spaventa, many from humble origins, buttress the cultural hegemony -- from "organic intellectuals," especially those from the lower classes who defend those class interests now and would do so in the new order as well. Mao likewise elevates the ideas of workers and peasants who have practical experience in manual labor over those of Ruist or Western-style intellectuals (Mao 1967f, 38-39; 1995d, 421). Here Mao implicitly links the unity of knowledge and practice with Wang's innate knowledge of the good. Invoking Mengzi's assertion that everyone can rectify their minds-and-hearts, Mao (and Liu Shaoqi) echo Lenin's call for the party to recruit individuals from all socioeconomic classes (Lenin 1975, 50), who will then "cultivate themselves" to become good Communist Party members (Liu 1967; Mao 1967f, 39-43). Here Mao seems to share the founders' -- and Gramsci's -- faith in the inherent goodness of those engaged directly in economic production. Mao's faith, however, seems based on the Ruist assumption of the inherent goodness of the mind-and-heart, which was unlikely to convince an Italian theorist raised in the protectorate of the doctrine of original sin.

Consciousness, Will, and Cultural Transformation

in Mao and Gramsci

Nevertheless, Mao's and Gramsci's views of culture were both consistent with Neo-Confucianism. Like Gramsci, Mao elevates those with revolutionary consciousness who do the "cultural work" incorporating workers and peasants into the party (Gramsci 1978a; Mao 1967g). Mao loosens the causal connection between socioeconomic background and consciousness even further than Lenin and Gramsci, describing how living among workers and peasants "fundamentally changed the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois feelings implanted in me in the bourgeois schools," transforming him "from one class to another (1967j, 73)." The first CCP Rectification Campaign was inspired by the Ruist notion of the *rectification of names* (*zhengming*), which requires that if one's conduct does not meet the criteria implied in the name of one's social role (as a filial son or loyal friend), one must rectify one's mind-and-heart and act in accordance with those criteria. Implemented through methods such as criticism-self-criticism, with workers and peasants criticizing the conduct of traditional elites or Party officials, this enterprise resembles Gramsci's call to create "new intellectuals." For like Gramsci, Mao asserts that intellectuals, construed as broadly as possible, play a significant role in history.

This role can materialize, however, only with the intervention of the will. Here the strongest idealist influence on Mao is Wang's stress on making the will sincere: Mao asserts that the will is necessary for the attainment of revolutionary consciousness (Mao 1967e, 209-210). This point coincides with Gramsci's reconceptualization of the "Modern Prince" – the party -- as the expression of a *common will*,[7] which, in Chinese (*tongzhi* 同志) means *comrade.* These similarities culminate in their shared vision of cultural transformation as indispensable to revolutionary change.

[7] As opposed to the will of Machiavelli's single individual, *The Prince* (1532).

Mao articulates this imperative stating, like Gramsci, that while "the material determines the mental (Mao 1967c, 336; cf. Marx 1978, 3-4)," the superstructure, including social consciousness, also affects the socioeconomic structure of society, and can even play a "decisive role" in so doing (Mao 1967c, 336). Here Mao joins Gramsci in displacing the relations of production from the economic base towards the superstructure, intimating that Marx's claim that individuals enter into relations of production "independent of their will (Marx 1978, 4)" was incorrect. Recalling how schools established by peasants in opposition to traditional Chinese and Western bourgeois education "resulted in a rapid rise in their cultural level (Mao 1967h, 54)," Mao concludes that backward villages must be transformed into "great military, political, economic *and cultural* bastions of the revolution (1967b, 316-317, emphasis added)."

Finally, in 1940, Mao embraces the imperative of cultural revolution expressly, proclaiming that the party has long "struggled for a cultural revolution as well as for a political and economic revolution. . . . [N]ot only do we want to change a China that is politically oppressed and economically exploited into a China that is politically free and economically prosperous, we also want to change the China which his being kept ignorant and backward under the sway of the old culture into an enlightened and progressive China under the sway of a new culture (1967d, 340)." Like Vico, Spaventa, and Gramsci, Mao recognizes that culture can have a decisive influence on socioeconomic progress. After the Bolshevik Revolution and World War I, he claims, the CCP became "the new cultural force" leading China's transition from a bourgeois-democratic revolution to a New Democratic revolution (371-373). "Revolutionary culture," he proclaims, "is a powerful revolutionary weapon for the broad masses of the people, prepar[ing] the ground ideologically before the revolution comes. . . . [It is] an essential fighting front (382)."

This view resonates with Gramsci's call for construction of an alternative cultural hegemony at the outset of the revolutionary movement. Echoing Spaventa, Gramsci observes that the importation of ideas from more advanced countries can create circumstances in which "the 'normal' base/superstructure relationship is inverted (2024h, 1303)." Although Mao does not contend with the

Vatican-cum-State or a mature bourgeois civil society, he shares Gramsci's concern with culture, with the spiritual dimension of the national community. This convergence reflects commonalities in their idealist philosophical traditions and illuminates the importance of culture as both a potent impediment and robust facilitator of socioeconomic transformation.

Conclusion

The analysis above demonstrates that the remarkable convergence between Gramsci's and Mao's views regarding consciousness, will, and cultural revolution is best explained by the influence of their idealist philosophical antecedents. Both emphasized the autonomy of spiritual elements such as philosophy, ideology, and culture and both the potential obstacles they pose to socioeconomic change. Gramsci and Mao went well beyond Lenin in decoupling base and superstructure and allowing for the inversion of that relationship in Marx's original theory. The implications are of universal and momentous significance for scholars studying evolutionary and revolutionary change alike. Where both theorists recognized that consciousness, will, and culture can impede material progress, they also discerned the solution therein, in the development of consciousness and exercise of the will to combat the existing hegemonies through cultural revolution. Although both theorists were materialists, their conviction that these spiritual forces, particularly culture, can also exercise a decisive influence to promote socioeconomic change reflects the influence of philosophical idealism upon both men.

This observation returns us to where we began, with Leibniz's endeavor to explain the concordance between ancient Ruism and his binary arithmetic system. The introduction of Chinese philosophy into Europe resulted in the incorporation of Ruist, particularly Neo-Confucian, ideas into German idealist philosophy, and such influences were reflected in Italian Hegelianism as well in Marxism itself. Rather than Spaventa's "circulation of Italian philosophy" to Europe and back, this analysis suggests the movement of idealist influences from China (and other sources) to Italy and Germany and back to Italy and China through the influence of German idealism upon Marxism. Under these

circumstances, it would be astonishing indeed if the views of Gramsci and Mao were *not* concordant. Shared idealist influences on the Italianization and Sinification of Marx's philosophy restored it, as it were, to its own Chinese and Western humanistic roots.

Mao's and Gramsci's ideas may have encouraged the cultural turn on the left, but they also cautioned against the defining culture too narrowly and tethering it too closely to economic forces. Recognizing that the resemblances between Mao and Gramsci arise from a shared philosophical legacy undermines conventional assumptions regarding the incommensurability of Eastern and Western philosophy. This analysis may help eliminate an artificial barrier to deploying their shared insights into consciousness, will, and culture to address the continual regression to autocracy and barbarity -- including contemporary democratic backsliding -- feared by Kongzi and Vico.

ORCID iD

Germaine A. Hoston https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9956-2315

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