

Mao Zedong – 1937

the Theory of Contradiction

“Contradiction is the very moving principle of the world.”

Hegel

A- The Universality of Contradiction

“Without contradiction, there would be no world (...) and as soon as the contradiction ceases, life too comes to an end. To deny contradiction in things and phenomena is to deny everything.”

Mao

I)

There are contradictions **in all processes**, in the outside world as much as in thought. Contradictions permeate processes **from beginning to end**.

In each important process, the situation is extraordinarily complex, and there are **a series of contradictions**, in their turn in contradiction with each other. Moreover each contradiction as well as the entire series go through a series of stages, and when the process is over, **it generates a new one following it**.

II)

To say that there is a contradiction is to say that things and phenomena are constituted and set in motion by **pairs of opposite aspects**, at the same time identical (united, bound) and conflicting (mutually excluding each other).

► **THE IDENTITY** of opposites (their reciprocal conditionality, their interpenetration) means that:

- each aspect presupposes the other, and that both coexist in unity;
- there is a bridge linking one opposite with the other: in determinate conditions each aspect transforms into its opposite, takes the position occupied by it, and both aspects merge.

The unity of opposites is alive, conditional, mobile, fleeting, temporary, relative.

THE STRUGGLE of opposites means that:

• the opposition between two aspects is endless, permeates the whole process from beginning to end, does not leave any phenomenon to completely rest and quantitative changes constantly happen;

• all processes have a beginning and an end: when gradual changes reach a high point, the dissolution of unity happens, a qualitative change resolving the contradiction which then gives way to another. **The conflict between opposites is ceaseless**, absolute, much as movement and development. A struggle takes place inside unity, and without struggle there can be no unity. ◀

The union of relative and conditional identity and absolute conflict shapes the movement of opposites of all phenomena.

III)

“Antagonism and contradiction are not at all the same thing” (Lenin). Antagonism is one of the forms taken by the struggle of opposites, not its universal form: some contradictions assume the character of antagonism, others are mere differences, of the type of contradictions “within the people”.

According to the concrete development of phenomena, some contradictions that are primitively non-antagonistic **develop into antagonisms and vice-versa**. During the initial period, contradictions do not develop at first into antagonisms.

• The theory of opposites is the Communists’ necessary method of investigation and exposition. It is its practical interest.

• Methods to resolve contradictions, i.e. forms of struggle, differ according to the type of contradiction and their stage of development.

B- The particularity of Contradiction

***“The very heart, the living soul of Marxism,
(is) the concrete analysis of a concrete situation.”***

Lenin

► All that is particular is conditional, temporary, and therefore relative; however it is in particularity and in it alone that universality exists. **Without particularity there can be no generality.**

Particularities and the relative, specific character of contradictions can be explained by their **unevenness of development**. There is nothing in the world that develops absolutely evenly, and we must fight the theory of even development, or theory of equilibrium.

It is precisely in the unevenness of the development of contradictions, in the modifications undergone by opposite aspects, that the force of the new superseding the old manifests itself. Such **contradiction between the new and the old** exists in every phenomenon, generating a series of conflicts with many twists and turns.

This truth concerning general and individual character, absoluteness and relativity, universality and specificity, of the primacy of specificity and unequal development is the **quintessence of the problem of contradiction in things**. Failing to understand this is tantamount to being opposed to materialist dialectics. ◀

IV)

Contradictory phenomena and each of the aspects of contradiction have their **particularities**. Particularity is the qualitative difference between things, which is the basis for real diversity. In other words, contradictions are defined, real, concrete. What is essential is to be able to distinguish, to delimit things; to pick up the particular features of all contradictions within a given process, their respective aspects, in isolation and as a whole (linking) and to link the whole with outside phenomena. This must be done for the entire process and for **each and every one of its stages**.

Similarly, **it is all about conditions**. Without determinate conditions, neither the formation of opposites, nor their coexistence, nor their transformation into one another can be possible.

V)

In any series of contradictions constituting a complex process (i.e. including more than two contradictions), **there is always a fundamental one**, conditioning the essence of the process. The fundamental contradiction acts on the other contradictions, determines their existence and their development in each instant of the process.

To say that there is a process is to say that the situation evolves. During the successive stages of development, on the one hand the fundamental contradiction eventually assumes a sharper and sharper character, and on the other hand subordinate contradictions are sharpened, or weakened, or absorbed, or a new one appears. It is the reason why there are distinctive stages.

To say that a situation changes during a process is to say that **contradictions move around**. Depending on the concrete conditions, at a given stage in the process, the fundamental contradiction may become subordinate. There is however at each stage of the process only one principal contradiction which plays the leading (dominant, decisive) role and has an influence on the secondary contradictions.

VI)

Of the two aspects of a contradiction, **one is inevitably the principal aspect**. Between the aspects of any given contradiction, equilibrium is but a temporary situation; the fundamental situation being uneven development. The character of things and phenomena is essentially determined by the principal aspect of the contradiction which occupies the dominant position.

The relative position of aspects is not immutable. The struggle power between the principal aspect and the secondary aspects changes. **During their conflict, they convert into each other**, leading to the modification of the character of the phenomenon. This is the reason why there is a way from one process to another.

- *The study of the various states of unevenness in the development of contradictions is the method by which a revolutionary party correctly determines its strategy and its political and military tactics. All Communists must pay it their constant attention.*
- *All contradictions within a given process should not all be taken up in the same way. The answer is to resolve particular and different contradictions with the aid of different and special methods,*
- *We must in all processes strive to find the principal contradiction (the main link) and, this being done, what is most important is to stick to this principal contradiction.*

Conclusion

- If we have a clear idea of the theory of contradiction, we can:
 - help our experienced comrades to turn this experience into a system, lifting it to the status of principle and avoid the mistakes of **empiricism**;
 - shatter the **dogmatic** conceptions which give a pounding on the fundamental principles of Marxism and do harm to our revolutionary cause. The dogmatics are lazybones, aliens to practice, who refuse the arduous study of concrete things.
- Dogmatics and empiricists are all **subjectivists**, in that they undertake a unilateral and superficial study of things. What we need is to use materialist dialectics in both study and exposition, to become masters of the scientific method. Stalin's "Foundations of Leninism" can be considered a "**model for the understanding of the particularity and the universality of contradiction and their interconnection**" (Mao).

Freddy Malot – january 1973
