

THE DIALECTICS OF OPPOSITION AND CONTRADICTION

Contradiction is the central concept of dialectical philosophy, and some of our previous columns have focused on it. In this column we discuss a more general concept that includes contradictions, the concept of opposition.

What Opposites Are

In order for things or processes to be opposites, they have to be different, but much more than difference is required. Opposites have to be exclusive, so that nothing can be entirely on both sides of an opposite relation at the same time. Also, opposites have to interact and change each other, at least some of the time.

An important example that shows these two features of an opposition—exclusion and interaction—is the relation between parents and their children. In every particular parent-child relation, the parents are one side and the children are the other. So being a parent excludes being a child in that relationship, and vice-versa. In each relationship, the parents are influenced by their children, and the children are influenced by their parents. So the parent-child relation is an opposition.

Is Something Wrong Here?

Some people are bound to object that they don't oppose their parents, but get along with them fine. This objection brings out the meanings of the concepts of "opposition" and "contradiction" in dialectics, which are a little different than the ordinary use of these

terms. Contradictions are defined as opposites in which the two sides interfere with each other, struggle against each other, or hold each other back. Not every opposition is a contradiction, however, at least not all the time. If an opposition is not a contradiction, it is called supplementary. Oppositions between parent and child, husband and wife, discussion and action, buying something and selling it, etc., can be supplementary at least some of the time.

Supplementary Oppositions Change

Suppose a diesel mechanic works on an engine that comes with a really good manual. The procedures and settings in the manual work perfectly in practice. The ideas in the manual and the practical work on the engine are opposites. Statements on paper and actual work on an engine are exclusive things—nothing is both. But the book was created from actual work at the engine factory and now guides actual work in the shop. So the contents of the manual and engine repair work interact, and are supplementary opposites.

Further experience by the mechanic is likely to change this situation, however. No manual is perfect. The mechanic may find better ways to do certain jobs, and not follow the manual any more. Or, he or she may find that if you tighten certain bolts as much as the manual says, they tend to break and create a problem that is hard to fix. Then the manual and the mechanic's practice aren't supplementary anymore, but in contradiction. It may be possible to eliminate the

contradiction by getting stronger bolts or by changing the manual. Even if this is done, however, some new contradiction is bound to show up later. Like the relation between parents and children, this case illustrates a general truth about opposites: They don't stay supplementary, but are contradictory at least some of the time.

Worker-Capitalist Opposition

The opposition between the capitalist class and the working class is always a contradiction, never supplementary. In the rare cases capitalists do something that workers actually want, it's only a tactic to keep exploiting them. But union bosses and politicians regularly say otherwise. They call on us to "share the sacrifice" of capitalist wars and economic crises, and push the lie that both workers and capitalists would benefit from this. The fact is that the worker-capitalist relation is always a struggle of opposites. Capitalists are always the enemies of workers, as the slave-owners and feudal lords were in previous systems based on the exploitation of labor.

The Dialectics of Opposition

Some oppositions are always contradictions, and all oppositions are contradictory sometimes, but there are important principles in communist dialectics that apply to all oppositions. In the next column, we will discuss the principle that things can turn into their opposites in particular circumstances.