

FREDERICK ENGELS ON THE LAWS OF DIALECTICS

One important contribution of Marx's comrade Engels to dialectics was his formulation of dialectical laws as general principles about change. He said that we should consider the world as consisting primarily of processes, not ready-made things. The laws of dialectics describe some of the features of all processes. As Engels put it, "dialectics is nothing but the science of the general laws of motion and development of nature, human society and thought."

Engels identified three basic laws of dialectics. In the last column we discussed one of these laws, called the "interpenetration of opposites." This law states that opposites are connected in such a way that the two sides have no sharp separation, but depend on and modify each other.

More is Different

Another of Engels' laws is the "transformation of quantity into quality." This means that increasing or decreasing the quantity of something far enough will produce a qualitative change. Water boils or freezes, qualitative changes in liquid water that take place if the water's temperature is increased or decreased far enough. Mass mobilization vastly increases the capability of people beyond that of a small group. Engels wrote that "the cooperation of a number of people, the fusion of many forces into a single force, creates ... a new power which is essentially different from the sum of separate forces."

Engels' third law is called the "negation of the negation." Engels also called this the law of "development through contradiction." The negation

referred to here is "dialectical negation," which means transforming something into its opposite as a result of the contradictions that it contains, destroying it or partially preserving it. A seed growing into a plant, a process that destroys ("negates") the seed, is a simple example of this negation. Engels described dialectical negation as "the true driving principle of all development—the splitting into opposites, their struggle and resolution."

The law of the negation of negation says that when a second dialectical negation follows the first, the result is always somewhat different from the situation before the first negation. The plant that grew out of the negation of the seed will normally produce many seeds, and each is likely to be somewhat different from the original seed.

This law says that historical change is not reversible and doesn't go in circles. Engels uses the example of the development of capitalism in England, which involved the capitalists seizing the property of many small producers, which was a dialectical negation. When the working class overthrows capitalism, it will seize all the capitalists' wealth and resources, produced over the centuries by the working class. This overthrow will lead to communism, however, and will not lead back to the original small-scale production. The second negation produces a new result.

By rejecting socialism, our movement is now involved in negating the negation. Attempts to negate capitalism by going through socialism

have all led to defeat. The working class can use the knowledge that socialism doesn't work to make the next revolution a fight directly for communism, negating the socialist attempt to negate capitalism.

What Makes the Three Laws Be "Laws"?

Engels thought that the three laws are proved by a large variety of cases from human history and thought, and from natural science. He particularly emphasized examples from chemistry and biology. It is important to understand what he means by calling these general conclusions "laws." As Engels (and Marx) used the term "law," a law can describe a necessary tendency that is always present but not always fully realized. Marx's law of the falling rate of profit describes a constant tendency for the capitalists' rate of profit to fall, although this tendency can be temporarily overcome by various means, like lowering workers' wages.

Enemies of dialectics accused Marx of trying to deduce that the victory of communism is historically necessary from the negation of the negation rather than from the scientific study of capitalism itself. Engels denied that this is possible or that Marx tried to do it. Instead, he saw dialectics as representing a comprehensive view of the world and a method for "advancing from the known to the unknown," a tool for understanding how processes develop.

For more material on Engels' dialectics, see the articles on the dialectics page at <http://ICW-PRedFlag.org>