

The History of Communist Dialectics

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**"Without revolutionary theory, there can be no revolutionary movement."
--V. I. Lenin, *What is to be Done?***

Dialectical Thinking Before Marxism

The central idea of dialectics is the unity and struggle of opposites, that is, contradictory tendencies that are tied together and cause things to change and develop. Philosophy based on this idea is essential to the science of communism.

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels were the founders of communist philosophy, but they did not start from scratch. They borrowed ideas from a long history of dialectical thought that dates back at least 25 centuries in Europe and was developed independently in China and India. We can only mention here the earliest and latest stages of that history.

The earliest major dialectical thinker in European history was the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who lived about 2500 years ago in what is now western Turkey. Heraclitus said that conflict is universal, "the father of everything," and makes some people slaves and others free.

Heraclitus emphasized that opposite qualities of things exist at the same time: "Seawater is very pure and very foul water; for fish it is drinkable and life-sustaining, for people it is undrinkable and deadly." "Writing is both straight and crooked." He recognized that things have a connection to their opposites, a connection that turns back on itself, "like a bow or a lyre."

Heraclitus drew the conclusion that everything constantly changes, that it isn't possible to step in the same river twice, since different water is constantly flowing by. He also said that things tend to turn into their opposites: disease turns into health, weariness into rest, hot into cold, etc.

Heraclitus' ideas were not well received by most other ancient Greek philosophers. They wanted to see stability in the natural world and social life, trying to make it plausible that the slave-owning class they represented would continue to rule indefinitely. Criticism by Heraclitus' opponents spread his ideas and allowed them to influence later generations.

Hegel's Big Contribution

The last major figure in the development of dialectical philosophy before Marxism was the German philosopher G. F. W. Hegel, who died in 1831. Hegel understood that he was following in Heraclitus' footsteps and wrote that "there is no proposition of Heraclitus which I have not adopted in my logic."

Hegel was inspired by the French revolution and worked closely with people fighting against the feudal monarchy in Prussia. He saw that conflict and contradiction are found everywhere, and that things and processes can only move themselves forward because they contain contradictions.

While contradictions within something can last a long time, they move toward their own elimination. The process of a contradiction eliminating itself is called "resolution." Hegel argued that resolving contradictions gives rise to new situations, which will contain new contradictions that require resolution.

Hegel made a profound and thorough (but very difficult) study of contradictions and other topics in dialectics, and applied these concepts to nature and society. This was the reason that Marx declared that Hegel was a "mighty thinker" and regarded himself as Hegel's pupil.

Despite Hegel's contributions, Marx and Engels found two serious errors in Hegel's philosophy. The first was that Hegel was not a materialist. Materialism says that material objects and structures are the basis of our thinking about them, thinking that represents those things more or less correctly. Our ideas about reality come ultimately from practical interaction with it.

Hegel did not see matter as the basis of thinking, but thinking as the basis of material things. He claimed that thinking is the "essential nature" of things, that thinking "goes out of itself" into things, and that "logical reason" holds the properties of things together and forms their unity. Marx rejected this idealist view as the reverse of the truth. He said that Hegel's philosophy was standing on its head, and needed to be turned over to stand on its feet, on material reality. Hegel's second big mistake was directly about dialectics. Hegel maintained that contradictions could be resolved in ways that preserved both opposite sides in a "higher unity," a synthesis that made them no longer contradictory. Marx argued that this is dead wrong about contradictions in the material world of society and nature. These are resolved by "fighting to a decision," with one side defeating the other. As we will see in future columns, this idea is the core of communist dialectics, with profound implications for the fight for communism.

Dialectical Ideas in Ancient China

The oldest known Chinese book, the Yihking (1143 BCE) included the ideas – fundamental to dialectics — that everything is always changing and that opposites are interconnected. Examples included Yin and Yang, heaven and earth, male and female, light and dark, strong and weak, father and mother. Changes in "heaven" and on earth were explained through the

development of these polar opposites.

The philosopher Lao-Tse (or Laozi) wrote that “when everyone on earth declares beauty beautiful, ugliness is thereby postulated.

When everyone on earth recognizes the good in goodness, thereby is evil postulated. Being and non-being produce each other. Heavy and light complete each other. Long and short compose each other. High and low invert each other. Voice and tone wed each other. Before and after follow each other.” (around 600 BCE) Mo'-ti' (or Mozi), a carpenter and inventor, brought materialism into ancient Chinese dialectics.

For example, he wrote that “My view of being and non-being rests on what the actual experience of the eyes or ears of the people accept as existent or non-existent, that is, on what is seen and heard.” (around 400 BCE) It shouldn't surprise us to learn that Mo'-ti' took a revolutionary attitude toward the ruling class of his time and that he believed that people could change their circumstances and direct their own lives.

Learning Dialectics From History

Like everything else, communist dialectical philosophy did not simply jump into existence. Its development has been a long process involving many theoretical struggles. These struggles have always been connected to practical political and economic issues. Getting a thorough understanding of dialectics in the 21st century requires knowing something about the process that got us here. This means that we have to study both the milestones and the mistakes in the development of dialectics within the communist movement. That is the purpose of this series.

In the first column in the series, we surveyed profound ideas from dialectical theory before Marx, ideas from Heraclitus and from Hegel. In this column and the next we discuss ideas from Karl Marx, the founder of communist dialectics. Karl Marx once wrote that he intended to produce a compact summary of his views about dialectics, but he never got around to it. Instead he applied his dialectical approach to many topics in his book *Capital* and in his political writings. These are our sources for Marx's dialectics and they are good sources, since they show what dialectics can be used for.

Dialectical Contradiction

Marx wrote that dialectical contradictions (which he called “Hegelian”) are the “source of all dialectics.” His examples show that a contradiction consists of two connected opposites that struggle and interfere with each other. For example, Marx described the contradictory relation between the use value and exchange value of a commodity (what you use it for vs. what you pay for it) as two “mutually conditioning, inseparable moments, which belong to one another, but which are at the same time extremes which exclude or oppose one another.” In capitalism, no matter how hungry you are, if you don't have the cash, you don't eat. Here the two sides of the contradiction are called “moments,” and the kind of connection they have is called “mutually conditioning.” That means that each side makes the other side different, like the two sides of the relation between parents and children.

Not all opposites contradict each other all the time. For example, circulation of goods and

services that workers need stands in opposition to the circulation of money and credit in a capitalist economy. Much of the time money and credit make the circulation of goods easier. In an economic crisis, however, debts and the need for money to pay them get in the way of the circulation of commodities and freeze up the economy. Then the two opposites, goods and services vs money and credit, struggle with each other. That is what makes their opposite relationship a contradiction.

Other Contradictions of Capitalism

Marx identified many contradictions within capitalism, including those that lead to “explosions, cataclysms, crises, ... regularly occurring catastrophes ... [and] finally to its violent overthrow.” One tendency in capitalism is to increase the forces of production without limit. This tendency exists because competition drives each capitalist to produce more goods at a lower cost. Under capitalism, however, things will only be produced if they can be sold for a profit. When capitalists try to find buyers for their production, they come up against a contradictory opposite. A large part of capitalism’s output is sold to workers who must be able to afford the product. But to make profits in production, capitalists need to hold down the wages of workers. The capitalists’ need to expand production and sell it to workers, and their need to hold down workers’ wages contradict each other.

Marx calls this contradiction the fundamental contradiction of capitalism. It is an example of a general pattern of the contradiction between capitalism’s fundamental relations of ownership and control, and the development of the forces of production. This contradiction means that although capitalism has created tremendous productive forces, the things the bosses need to do to make maximum profits interfere with the fullest growth of production to meet people’s needs.

Resolution of Contradictions

It is a basic idea of dialectics that when a contradiction exists and its two opposite sides struggle, the contradiction tends to move toward its own elimination. The process of elimination of a contradiction is called resolution. Marx wrote that the contradiction between the workers as a class and the capitalists as a class “is private property as its developed relation of contradiction, hence an energetic relation driving toward resolution.” In a capitalist crisis, the contradiction between the use of money and the circulation of goods is eventually resolved—until the next crisis. The fundamental contradiction between expanding production and holding down wages can’t be resolved under capitalism, however, but only by communist revolution.

In our next column, we will discuss Marx’s ideas on how contradictions can be resolved.

Marx on How Contradictions are Resolved

In the last column, we saw that a contradiction is a struggle between two connected processes, tendencies, or situations. We looked at several contradictions of capitalism, and saw that contradictions can be resolved, that is, come to an end. In this column we summarize Marx’s ideas on how this can happen.

Dialectical Contradictions in Thought and in Reality

The contradictions we have discussed so far are inside the capitalist system, but contradictions occur in other economic systems, in nature, and in thought. Marx wrote that contradictions in reality tend to produce contradictory thoughts and statements, but "contradictions lie in the thing, not the linguistic expression of the thing." Both the contradictions in thought and language and the contradictions in social or natural reality, which are called "real contradictions," can be resolved, but not necessarily in the same way.

Resolution of Real Contradictions

During the resolution of a real contradiction, the relationship between the contradictory sides has to change. Marx called this process that leads to resolution "development." Development involves at least four kinds of changes:

(1) Development involves a contradiction becoming simpler and more clearly defined. For example, the transformation of landowners into capitalists is a "movement of reality" that "will simplify the opposition [between labor and capital], drive it to a peak and therefore accelerate its resolution."

(2) In development a contradiction becomes more obvious. For example in a crisis in the world market like the present one, "the "contradictions and oppositions of bourgeois production become striking."

(3) In development a contradiction becomes sharper, more intense, or being "driven to a peak." For example, Marx wrote that England in 1848 was "the country in which the oppositions of modern bourgeois society, the class struggles between bourgeoisie and proletariat, are developed most fully and driven to the highest peak."

(4) In development a contradiction causes motion of some kind. Marx wrote that the process of exchange of commodities "includes relations that contradict and exclude one another. The development of the commodity does not cancel these contradictions, but creates a form within which they can move. This is in general the method through which real contradictions are solved." He also said in *Capital*, Volume I, that the elliptical motion of a planet around the Sun is caused by contradictory factors. [This paragraph has been edited to clarify the text].

The opposed sides of a real contradiction cannot be unified or reconciled. Development is the only way to resolve their contradiction. Resolution can only happen when the conflict between the two sides is "driven to a peak" and one side defeats the other. Marx sharply attacked people who tried to resolve contradictions without development by "mediating" between the working class and the bosses, and trying to prevent the two sides from "fighting to a decision."

There may be some contradictions that will not be resolved because they have little or no tendency to develop. This is certainly not true of the basic contradictions of capitalism, since, as the *Communist Manifesto* said, "the development of class opposition [between workers and capitalists] keeps step with the development of industry."

Contradictions in Ideas and Theories

In many cases the process of resolution of contradictions between ideas is the same as with real contradictions. Marx was well known for his determined struggle to defeat wrong ideas and theories, especially in politics and economics. There are cases, however, where

opposing points of view may both be partly right, and their contradiction can be resolved by finding the right connections between them. Marx says that this is possible in economic theory and gives an example from mathematics.

The Value of Dialectics

As his comments quoted above show, Marx put a very high value on dialectics. Because dialectics shows that everything changes and nothing lasts forever, Marx saw it as "inherently critical and revolutionary." Surely, he was right. We need to conduct mass education for dialectics, and make it a tool for communist revolution.

Frederick Engels Advances Dialectics

During four decades Frederick Engels worked closely with Karl Marx in organizing the communist movement and developing communist theory. They created a kind of division of labor in their writing. Engels wrote about military matters and natural science, Marx wrote on economics, and they both wrote about politics and history.

Engels also worked on popularizing and defending dialectics. In private, Engels was quite critical of Marx's sometimes very difficult presentation of dialectical ideas in *Capital*. He wrote that a reader who hasn't been to college "will certainly not be pleased to torture himself" in order to understand what Marx wrote there about the contradiction between the use of a commodity and what it costs.

Engels wrote several articles and books that tried to make dialectics clearer, and he also made genuine contributions to the theory of dialectics. We will discuss some of his main ideas in this column and the next.

Dialectical Versus Metaphysical Thinking

Engels used the term "metaphysical" to describe anti-dialectical thinking. This is not the only way to use that term in communist philosophy.

Metaphysics can also describe questions about the basic make up of the universe, so that idealism and materialism are fundamentally opposed views in metaphysics. As Engels used the term, however, metaphysics means a kind of rigid thinking that denies the interconnection of opposites.

Opposites like the working class and the capitalist class don't have a strict dividing line. Some people, like movie stars or elite professional athletes, don't fit neatly in either category. Some workers go into business and some capitalists go bankrupt and have to get a job.

Engels said that this is typical of opposites, that they don't have rigid divisions but each side crosses any dividing line and penetrates into the other and the relationships of the two sides change over time. This kind of relationship is called "interpenetration" of opposites. Denying interpenetration is "metaphysical thinking," which tries to impose arbitrary categories on reality.

Engels said that "nature is the proof of dialectics" and gave many examples from natural science of metaphysical versus dialectical thinking. Darwin's theory of evolution, for example, overthrew the metaphysical idea of a species as an unchanging category that is sharply divided from every other species. Scientists have been able to discover many intermediate

cases between classes of animals, like those between giant dinosaurs and birds. Engels also saw Darwin's theory as an example of the relationship between the philosophical concepts of chance and necessity. He pointed out that the necessary process of natural selection depends on mutations, which are chance variations in an organism's genes. So in evolution, chance and necessity are opposites that "interpenetrate" and depend on each other.

Contradiction and Interpenetration of Opposites

The fact that conflicts and contradictions cause change, which is the heart of dialectics, is closely connected with the interpenetration of opposites.

Engels rejected the idea that a dialectical contradiction can simply be defined as a pair of forces pushing or pulling in opposite directions, like a game of "tug of war." This definition is wrong because it leaves out the connection between contradictory sides, where each side partly determines what the other side is.

For example, imperialist powers planning for war have to match the weapons systems of their opponents. Some members of the working class take on characteristics of the capitalist class, like selfishness, greed, and racism.

Engels considered the interpenetration of opposites to be a law of dialectics. In the next column we will see what he meant by calling this a law and discuss two more of Engels' laws.



Statue of Karl Marx, left, and Frederick Engels in a Berlin park

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 ICWPRedFlag.org

Engels' Contributions To Dialectics

In this final column on Engels' dialectics, we discuss another area of dialectics that he developed. We will also mention a significant error, and summarize his influence on the later

development of dialectics.

The Dialectics of Knowledge

Engels understood that social practice is the basis of all knowledge, that it is “the alteration of nature by people, not just nature as such, which is the most essential and immediate basis of human thought.” Creating theories and testing them in practice is a process that results in a series of partial truths, some of which will be corrected and expanded, and some overturned. The dialectical development of knowledge includes twists, leaps forward, reverses, and scientific revolutions. Engels said that although some natural or economic laws can be established “in pure form,” we usually achieve only partial or approximate truths.

Engels gives the example of Boyle’s Law, about the relation between the volume and the pressure of a gas. This law had recently been discovered to be wrong in some cases. Boyle’s law only proved to be “approximately true,” that is, “true only within definite limits.” No one could now prove it to be “absolutely and finally true within those limits.”

Failure to understand the dialectical development of knowledge leads to the absurd conclusion that since Boyle’s Law can be modified, it is “not a genuine truth, hence not a truth at all.” This kind of reasoning is not uncommon in idealist philosophy. Approximate or incomplete truth is not simply wrong, but a stage in the development of knowledge, a stage where our knowledge may guide practice effectively. Further development of that knowledge can lead to more effective practice.

An Important Mistake

Learning from the development of dialectics has to include recognizing some mistakes. Engels got the one we mention here from Hegel, his idealist predecessor. Hegel claimed that motion, even simply moving from one place to another, is a contradiction, an idea that Hegel borrowed from the ancient Greek philosopher Zeno.

It is a central idea of dialectics that contradictions cause motion, but that is quite different from saying that motion actually is a contradiction. Engels made this claim as a major part of his case that contradictions occur everywhere, since matter is in motion everywhere. His argument, dating back to Zeno, is that if something moves, then it must be in some place at each moment but at the same time also not be at that place, which is a contradiction. This is a mistake. Whether you consider the place where an object is located to be a single point or a region of space, motion does not require that a moving thing both be somewhere and also not be there at the same time.

This mistaken idea mattered. It has often been ridiculed by the enemies of dialectics and led to considerable confusion and heated debates as communist philosophy developed in the Soviet Union. The cause of this error was probably Engels relying too much on Hegel.

Influence of Engels’ Dialectics

It is hard to exaggerate Engels’ influence on the later development of dialectics. His book *Anti-Dühring* and his pamphlet on Feuerbach were translated into many languages and widely read in the late 19th century. His influence was very important in the struggles against anti-dialectical philosophy that took place in the early years of the Soviet Union. Engels’ unfinished book *Dialectics of Nature* was first published in the USSR in 1925. It was particularly important as an example of integrating the study of dialectics with natural and social science.

This book also became the central target for those who wanted to reject or distort dialectics,

claiming that dialectics is simply wrong, or is only about thinking, or only applies to society, not to nature. We will discuss some of these attacks in future columns.

Why Philosophy Matters: Revolution, Not Reform

Philosophy is always connected with politics, but the connection of dialectics with revolution is particularly close. This is easy to see in the development of revisionism, that is, the reformism and the rejection of revolution that began in the communist movement in the late 1800s. At that time the communist movement called itself “social democracy.” Social democrats organized for socialism as a stepping-stone to communism, a strategy we now know to be fatally wrong.

As the contradiction between revolutionaries and reformers developed into a definite split in the socialist movement, the term “social democrat” came to be used for the anti-revolutionary side, while the revolutionaries called themselves “communists.” By the time of World War I, the reformists got the upper hand in the large Socialist Party of Germany (SPD), and turned the party into an arm of the German state. The SPD voted for the imperialist war in 1914, helped the government to suppress protest, and helped kill leading communists during the failed revolutions in Germany in 1919.

The best-known statement of the revisionist line came from Eduard Bernstein’s book *The Preconditions of Socialism*, published in 1899. Bernstein was an SPD intellectual, editor of a socialist newspaper and associate of Frederick Engels until Engels’ death in 1895. His book denied most of what Marx had shown to be the laws of motion of capitalism. He rejected the labor theory of value, and claimed that big economic crises and the concentration of capital in the hands of a few billionaires did not have to happen under capitalism. Instead of revolution, Bernstein said that socialism would be gradually achieved by winning elections, trade union organizing, and the influence of the SPD in the government. These ideas are still typical of social democrats today.

Dialectics and Revolution

Bernstein claimed that dialectics was responsible for the central role of revolution in Marxist politics. He complained that Marxism falsely maintained “the immeasurable creative power of revolutionary political force.” Bernstein said workers’ lives would gradually improve under capitalism so that revolution is unnecessary, but that “Hegelian principles,” that is, dialectics, deny this.

Actually, scientific dialectical analysis of capitalism shows us that its crises never end and its contradictions must become more intense, leading eventually to communist revolution. So revisionists must oppose dialectics, since they oppose revolution.

Reformism and Idealist Morality

Bernstein and other revisionists wanted a replacement for dialectics, and they picked the idealist morality derived from the 18th-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant. This is the opposite of the materialist morality developed by Marx and Engels. They emphasized that the working class has a “task” or a “calling” that we ought to carry out, overthrowing the capitalist system and reorganizing society as communism. This is an “ideal of the revolutionary tasks laid down for an oppressed class by the material conditions” we live

under. Communist moral ideals derive from the needs of the working class oppressed by capitalism, and what we can accomplish by mass mobilization for communism.

The revisionists decided to go “back to Kant” to avoid justifying revolution. According to Kant, morality does not aim at the welfare or happiness of humanity, but only at the rational action of individuals. Kant hoped that God exists and has created the world so that good actions would be rewarded with happiness, but denied that anyone could prove this. He derived morality from the abstract principle that a person’s will should never contradict itself by willing one kind of action for him or herself and another kind for other people.

Kant hoped that “reason” would have a non-material influence that would make people follow his principle. His morality tried to appeal to the conscience of the rulers, but he opposed revolution or even public protest. Kant condemned exploitation, but capitalists are certainly not going to get that Kantian message, since exploiting labor is the heart of their system. It would be hard to find a philosophy less helpful to workers’ struggles, which explains why Kantianism became popular with revisionists all over Europe, who tried to substitute idealist “moral socialism” for “dialectical socialism,” that is, communist revolution.

Fighting For Dialectics Against Revisionism

In the last dialectics column we described the sharp division in the working class movement between communists and revisionists that came into the open in the early 1900s, especially in Germany. The revisionists denied most of Marxism but rejected dialectics in particular. This was because they recognized that the growth of contradictions within capitalism would make revolution necessary, a conclusion they rejected. The revisionist rejection of materialism was equally important, since they wanted to substitute Kant’s idealist, non-class morality for the revolutionary tasks that the laws of motion of capitalism set out for the working class.

Although their numbers were small, communists in many European countries fought the ideological battle for communist ideas against the revisionists and their support of imperialist war. The most determined struggle specifically for dialectics and materialism, however, came from Russian communists G. Plekhanov and V. I. Lenin. The next few columns will describe their efforts, which proved to be fundamental for the further development of communist philosophy.

Plekhanov was one of the founders of the communist movement in Russia. His role would eventually prove to be enormously contradictory, involving major contributions, but also errors and betrayals. From the beginning, Plekhanov sharply attacked the idealism of the revisionists, fighting for space in German Socialist Party newspapers to do this. In books, articles and speeches he explained and defended dialectics and attacked efforts to distort it.

Plekhanov Against “Legal Marxism”

In his work “Criticism of our Critics”, Plekhanov exposed the bogus reasoning of Russian revisionist P. Struve. Struve had watered down Marxism to make it “legal,” that is, acceptable to the tsarist censorship. He had argued that the contradictions of capitalism could be “blunted” so they would not lead to revolution. Plekhanov combined philosophical analysis and economic data in his refutation of Struve’s “blunting.” He showed that contradictions in the history of the communist movement had not only not been resolved by “blunting,” but by becoming more intense, which is the way contradictions are resolved in general. Plekhanov

argued that the content of growing social production was constantly straining against the capitalist form that restricts it, a prime example, he said, of the “revolutionary significance of Marxist dialectics.”

Lenin Against the Narodniks

Lenin’s first major work, which was directed against the Narodnik movement, devoted sections to materialism and to dialectics. The Narodniks opposed the tsarist system in Russia with terrorist actions like assassinating the Tsar, although a large section of the Narodniks did not oppose capitalism. They saw the small peasants as the revolutionary class. Lenin directed his fire particularly against Narodnik N. K. Mikhailovsky, who rejected dialectics and tried to refute the materialist idea that class relations and class struggle determine the development of class society.

Lenin noted that Mikhailovsky was using a common strategy for attacking dialectics. He attacked Hegel’s specific form of dialectics, trying to conclude that communist dialectics makes the same errors. In particular Mikhailovsky claimed that the “triad” pattern of “thesis—antithesis— synthesis” was the basis of dialectical development. Lenin pointed out that Engels had long ago written that “triad” patterns are not a necessary part of communist dialectics and nothing could be “proved” with them. Combatting Mikhailovsky’s distortions, Lenin outlined core ideas of dialectics, which he called “the scientific method in sociology.” Lenin’s emphasis on the importance of dialectics in this early work would be carried forward into his later writings, both those on communist theory and on practical political work.

Dialectics and Politics Go Hand-in-Hand

In our last column on the history of dialectics, we gave credit to Russian communist G. Plekhanov for his struggle to defend dialectics and materialism. We noted that Plekhanov made major errors in philosophy that reinforced his increasingly reactionary politics. To understand his errors we need to look back to an old form of materialism, before dialectical materialism was developed.

Mechanical versus Dialectical Materialism

In the 17th and 18th centuries, successful developments in the science of mechanics became the model for the philosophy called “mechanical materialism.” Mechanical materialism says that things only change because of external causes that act on them. Some 18th century philosophers applied this idea to human societies. D’Holbach claimed that people’s choices are determined by causes outside of them and Montesquieu claimed that climate and soil largely determine the structure of societies.

Dialectics rejects the idea that all change in things is caused from the outside. Instead, the internal structure and internal contradictions of a system or process are the main causes of how it changes. External factors have an influence, but the changes that actually result from them depend on internal factors.

A key example of this dialectical idea is expressed in the Communist Manifesto: the history of class societies is the history of class struggle. The social relations between classes determine whether or how external influences result in social changes. The kinds of changes that result from natural resources, climate change or drought will be very different in communist society than under capitalism. Under capitalism, money, profits and capitalist rivalries stand in

the way of the best response to external conditions, obstacles that won't exist under communism.

Plekhanov and Mechanical Materialism

Despite his defense of dialectics as a general theory, Plekhanov's analysis of the development of capitalism was essentially a mechanical materialist one. He claimed that "the properties of the geographical environment determine the development of the productive forces" of society, and that these productive forces determine "all other social relations."

The productive forces of society are the people, tools, resources and knowledge that make production possible. Plekhanov's claim that the "geographic environment" determines these forces is pure mechanical materialism, determination by forces outside society. This is not just bad dialectics; it is a wrong historical explanation. For example, in the last 20 centuries Europe has passed through slavery, feudalism, the rise of capitalism and capitalism's development into imperialism, with a huge increase in the forces of production. The geographic environment of Europe was similar to other places on the Earth that have had very different development of the forces of production. Europe developed differently because of factors, such as the relative weakness of feudalism, internal to society, not geography.

The second part of Plekhanov's theory is that the level of productive forces determines a society's social relations. Marx and Engels saw forces of production and social relations of production—class relations—as influencing each other, but Plekhanov claimed that the forces of production play the dominant role in social development. This error played a major role in the development of anti-revolutionary politics in Russia and later in the world communist movement.

Plekhanov argued that since Russia's forces of production were relatively backward, communist revolution had to be put off for a long time. He supported the development of capitalism in Russia and attacked Lenin and the Bolsheviks for their support of the 1905 revolution. Later Plekhanov supported tsarist Russia in its imperialist war with Germany in World War I.

Plekhanov's errors were not merely philosophical, and the claim that productive forces determine social relations is not merely bad dialectics. We should not expect philosophical criticism to substitute for the scientific evaluation of actual social practice. Social practice in the Russian revolution gives a clear example that the forces of production do not determine everything. Although the socialist revolution in Russia actually produced a form of capitalism, it changed the social relations of production enough to produce a huge increase in the forces of production. The rapid industrialization in the first decades after the revolution made it possible for the USSR to survive and be the main force in the defeat of Nazism in World War II. The social relations produced by the mass mobilization for communism will give the working class even greater power to determine society's forces of production, without the restrictions on production and planning that money and wages always impose.

Lenin's Fight for Objective Truth

After the failure of the 1905 revolution in Russia, many communists were killed or sent to Siberia, or went abroad. Activist workers were black-listed by factory owners. Demoralized, some communists argued that the party should be abolished. Some Bolshevik intellectuals

advocated a philosophy that rejected materialism, promoted a new religion, and attacked dialectics. Plekhanov and other reformists correctly criticized these Bolshevik philosophers. Lenin recognized that the philosophy these guys advocated would do serious harm to the communist movement. By March 1908 he was hard at work on a book attacking it: *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. This book was a fundamental text for the later development of communist philosophy. In this column we describe the idealist views that Lenin was attacking. In our next two columns we will describe the arguments of Lenin's book and discuss some of its shortcomings.

Subjective Idealism

The wrong position that these Bolshevik philosophers were defending is usually called subjective idealism, which says that the only things that exist are minds and the sensations or ideas in those minds. Subjective idealism says there is no world outside of individual minds, and what we call rocks, people, classes or mountains are just "complexes of sensations." Crazy as it is, this has been a popular variety of capitalist philosophy during several periods in the last 300 years. The version of subjective idealism that these Bolshevik philosophers advocated was called "neutral monism," developed in Germany, England and the U. S.

"Neutral Monism"

The distinctive feature of neutral monism is that rather than saying that everything is made up of sensations and ideas, it says that everything is composed of "elements." An element was supposed to be something that is neither mental nor physical, but neutral between the two. The neutral monists claimed that they were neither idealists nor materialists, but had overcome the contradiction between these two positions.

The obvious question is "What is an element?" A little digging shows that for the neutralists, "element" is just another name for sensation. As leading neutralist Ernst Mach put it, "colors, sounds, pressures, spaces, times (what we usually call sensations) are the real elements of the world" and physical things are just "symbols" for relatively stable "complexes of sensations."

Materialism vs. Neutral Monism

The neutral monists rejected the materialist idea of a real world beyond our sensations and tried to come up with a way to explain how objective knowledge is possible. Bolshevik neutralist Alexander Bogdanov, who was the main target of Lenin's book, denied that there is any reality underlying our experience. Objectivity, he claimed, does not mean that our thinking corresponds to reality, as materialism says. It just means that people's experiences are "socially organized" and "harmonize" with each other. He saw truth as just a matter of consistency and agreement.

It is probably impossible to find anything that everyone agrees on, but it is easy to find completely false beliefs that have been accepted by nearly everyone at some time or other. It has never been true that the earth is flat, that God exists or women are inferior to men, but there has been "socially organized" agreement on these. Since not everyone reads *Red Flag* yet, there are also lots of really important truths that are not yet believed by most people.

Objective Truth and Communism

It is easy to see why Lenin took time out from working on the party newspaper to refute this trash. Truths aren't necessarily "socially harmonized" beliefs. Contradictions in beliefs are

always present, and drive people to revise their thinking. We can't win the fight for communism if we don't understand that there are objective truths with profound consequences but that aren't accepted by most people—yet.

Lenin Fights For Materialism

In a previous issue we described Lenin's fight against the anti-materialist philosophy called "neutral monism." Neutral monism claimed that everything is made up of "elements." Elements were advertised as something that is neither mental nor physical, but they turn out to be just sensations and thoughts. In this column we outline Lenin's arguments against neutral monism.

Lenin's Main Arguments

Lenin's arguments concentrated on four points: (1) neutral monism is just a disguised version of subjective idealism, which says there is no world outside of individual minds, and objects are just "complexes of sensations." (2) Neutralism is incompatible with natural science. (3) Neutralism promotes religion. (4) Neutralism is internally inconsistent.

Neutral monism is just subjective idealism

The neutralists liked to claim that they were not idealists but had overcome the opposition between materialism and idealism. Analyzing the writings of the various neutralists, Lenin showed that despite their disagreements with each other, they all claimed that the physical universe is a product of sensations and thoughts. This is the direct opposite of materialism, which recognizes that sensing and thinking can only be done by material beings with nerves and brains.

Neutralism is incompatible with natural science

In the science in Lenin's time, it was already well known that the earth was far older than humans or other living beings. That means that it is impossible for the earth to be a product of sensations or thoughts, since there was nothing that could feel or think when it came into existence.

This point is a variation on a standard objection to subjective idealism, that if it were right, a tree that fell in the forest would make no sound, since no one could hear it. The standard answer from idealists is to claim that God exists, perceives everything, and hears the falling tree.

Most of the neutralists avoided appealing to God, but tried to wiggle out of their contradiction in other ways. Some claimed that the earth really did not exist before people did. Others claimed that people can mentally "project" themselves into the past, a past that would then consist of their "projected" thoughts. "If we 'mentally project' ourselves," Lenin wrote, "our presence will be imaginary — but the existence of the earth prior to man is real."

Neutralism promotes faith and religion

Alexander Bogdanov, one of Lenin's main opponents, defined truth "an ideological form – an organizing form of human experience." Bogdanov said that "socially organized or objective experience" must "harmonize with the rest of collective experience" and "with the chain of causality."

But Lenin explained that Catholicism fits this definition well. "Catholicism has been 'socially

organized, harmonized and coordinated' by centuries of development; it 'fits in' with the 'chain of causality' in the most indisputable manner; for religions did not originate without cause, it is not by accident that they retain their hold over the masses under modern conditions."

The neutral monist approach to truth can't tell the difference between true ideas and false ones that are organized and widely believed. It not only has to say that religions are true but it promotes faith and "fideism," the idea that people should accept as true ideas that aren't supported by the evidence.

The inconsistencies of neutralism

Generally speaking, just looking at the consequences of a philosophical theory is not enough to understand it thoroughly, and critical evaluation of its coherence and consistency is important as well. Lenin included this kind of criticism in his attack on neutralism.

Solipsism is the absurd idea that my mind is the only thing that I can know to actually exist, so that the rest of the universe may exist only in my imagination. Neutral monists were anxious to reject solipsism because accepting it would make their position inconsistent. You can't say that truth is a socially organized experience if society may exist only in your head.

Starting from the neutralist premises, however, Lenin argued that "it is impossible to arrive at the existence of other people besides oneself." If I can't infer that my sensations are caused by real things beyond me then I can't infer that any mind exists other than my own. Thus neutral monism cannot reject solipsism, and hence is absurd as well as reactionary.

Lenin and Reflection

In previous columns we discussed Lenin's defense of materialism in *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, a book that later became a fundamental source for Marxist philosophy in the USSR. Although the book's case against idealism is a good one, its explanation of how people learn from experience is fundamentally flawed. In this column we explain this flaw and discuss its importance for communist politics.

The Theory of Reflection

Marx and Engels often used the term "reflection" to express the important materialist idea that reality is the source of our ideas. As Engels put it, "All ideas are taken from experience, are reflections—true or distorted—of reality."

Ideas that reflect reality don't have to be true, however, but can be completely wrong. Engels wrote that "All religion ... is nothing but the fantastic reflection in men's minds of those external forces which control their daily life, a reflection in which the earthly forces assume the form of supernatural forces." The fact that forces are reflected in some people's minds as supernatural forces does not mean that the supernatural actually exists. Illusions promoted by capitalist propaganda reflect the reality of capitalist domination, but that doesn't make them true.

Lenin's Copy Theory of Reflection

In Lenin's version of reflection, knowing is copying reality, and our "perceptions and ideas" are "images" of reality. "Matter is a philosophical category denoting the objective reality," he wrote, "which is given to man by his sensations, and which is copied, photographed and reflected by our sensations...." It isn't just sensations that copy reality, but theories: "The recognition of theory as a copy, as an approximate copy of objective reality, is materialism."

Lenin's "images," "copying" or "photographing" metaphors express the true idea that sense perception and theorizing can provide true or approximately true information about reality. Talking about copying or photographing suggests, however, that coming to know is a straightforward or automatic process, which certainly isn't true. Some ideas and even some sense perceptions are not like copies at all. The smell of a rotten fish warns us not to eat it, but the smell is not a copy or an image of the fish or the chemicals that cause the smell. Knowing something about reality isn't necessarily copying it.

Lenin's copy theory leaves out two critical aspects of knowing: (1) the practical and mental activity of the knower and (2) the dialectic of theory and practice.

Activity of the Knower

Whether an individual or group of people can learn from experience depends on what they already believe and what they actually do. False beliefs, racism, superstition, dishonesty, laziness, arrogance and other defects inside a person can prevent people from knowing by keeping them from gathering the right experiences or drawing the right conclusions from them. (How many leftists have drawn the correct conclusion from the evidence that socialism cannot lead to communism?).

Learning from experience is not very much like copying or photographing. Even seeing correctly requires action, paying attention and getting into the right position to see, like a soccer referee. Fixing an old theory or thinking up a new one is not copying, either.

The Dialectic of Theory and Practice

Lenin understood that success or failure in practice tells us whether our ideas are true or not. He wrote: "Things exist outside us. Our perceptions and ideas are their images. Verification of these images, differentiation between true and false images, is given by practice."

What is missing here is the role of practice in allowing us to find true theories and the role of theory in guiding our practice. Better practice makes possible better theories, which make possible even more successful practice. This dialectical process is not copying reality, it is interacting with it. Knowing is a two-way process in which people change the world to understand it and understand it to change it. Lenin's book focused only on the effect that nature and society have on the knower, which is a mechanical materialist approach, not dialectics.

Later Developments

Many of the points made here were recognized by later Soviet philosophy, which developed a better theory of reflection that included the activity of the knower. Lenin also brought dialectics into his later philosophical ideas. In China, Mao Zedong explained the dialectics of theory and practice.

Soviet philosophy textbooks never faced up to the errors of Lenin's book, however, since they wanted to portray him as a great genius who was right about everything. In China's Cultural Revolution, Lenin's book became the bible of pro-capitalist philosophers. It was useful to them because if knowledge had to copy reality, then we couldn't know about communism since communist reality doesn't exist yet.

We can know about communism, however, not by copying, but by combining the theoretical and practical knowledge gained in past revolutions and putting it in hands of the working class.

Lenin on the Dialectics of Catastrophe and Revolution

In our last column we discussed some of the shortcomings in Lenin's dialectical thinking about knowledge. Events in the summer of 1914 prompted Lenin to study dialectics more thoroughly and make important advances in communist philosophy.

In July 1914 the European imperialists began World War I, a battle over capitalist plunder that would slaughter millions. The European socialists (the "Second International") had seen this coming, and the socialist parties of most countries had pledged to oppose imperialist wars and organize mass political strikes if one was started. What actually happened is that almost all the leaders of the socialist parties supported "their own" governments and tried to stop communist workers who wanted to turn the war into a revolution. The international socialist movement that had seemed to be fighting to overthrow capitalism turned into its opposite, supporting imperialism and helping to oppress the working class.

Although he was fighting to build up a new communist movement that would use the war as an opportunity for revolution, Lenin started to study the dialectical philosophy of Hegel immediately after the war began. Some of Lenin's conclusions from this study showed up in his articles and speeches, but Lenin recorded much more in notebooks that were only published after his death. We summarize his most important ideas in this column and the next one.

The Dialectics of Development

The catastrophes of 1914 completely contradicted the idea of historical development that was common in the Second International, that the workers' movement would gradually evolve, increasing in size and power until it overthrew capitalism. This outlook corresponded to one of two basic viewpoints about historical change identified by Lenin. One sees change as "decrease or increase, as repetition," usually without being able to give a general explanation of what causes such changes.

The opposite viewpoint is the dialectical one. It recognizes that in addition to increase or decrease, development "often proceeds by leaps, and via catastrophes and revolutions in nature and society." The reason for these "breaks in continuity" is that processes are driven by the "contradiction and conflict" of the forces and tendencies inside things, events, and societies. Contradictions tend to become more intense and break out into sudden changes like an explosion or economic crisis. Thus dialectics sees sudden outbreaks (like the "Arab Spring") or sudden collapses (like the Iraqi army in the last few weeks) as normal events that should be expected. Lenin said that it is only the unity of opposites, aspects of processes that are connected but exclude each other, that can explain the processes in the real world.

Turning into the Opposite

One of the things that happens in a real process is turning into its opposite, that is, taking on characteristics that are the opposite of those it used to have, like the pre-war socialist movement that turned into an arm of imperialism. The Second International allowed reformers and self-promoters to become leaders, especially trade union bureaucrats, who allied themselves with the capitalists to keep their cushy jobs. These opportunists were tolerated as legitimate members of the movement, alongside revolutionaries. At the beginning of the war

pro-capitalist leaders won the class struggle inside the Second International and led it to support imperialism, the opposite of its supposed goal.

After the Second International collapsed, revolutionaries in Russia were able to build up the communist party—the Bolsheviks—out of the crisis of the war. They turned collapse into its opposite, the successful revolution in October 1917, three years later.

The Struggle of Opposites

Lenin emphasized that the unity of opposites is temporary and limited, but “the struggle of mutually exclusive opposites is absolute, just as development and motion are absolutes.” The unity of the reformers and revolutionaries in the workers’ movement ended when the war started, but the struggle of these two sides will continue as long as capitalism exists. The trend in the history of processes is for their internal contradictions to become stronger and break up any previous unity of opposites. Lenin said that wholes dividing into contradictory sides is actually the “essence of dialectics.”

Summing Up Lenin’s Ideas on Dialectics

This column finishes our discussion of Lenin’s contributions to dialectical materialism.

The “Law of Uneven Development”

Previously we discussed Lenin’s view that dialectics means that change happens by revolutions and breaks in continuity, rather than only by smooth and gradual increase and decrease. Lenin made an important application of this idea in his argument that imperialist powers cannot divide up the world without wars. The economic and military strength of the powers taking part in the division “does not change to an equal degree, for the even development of different undertakings, trusts, branches of industry, or countries is impossible under capitalism.... Is it conceivable that in ten or twenty years’ time the relative strength of the imperialist powers will have remained unchanged? It is out of the question.”

Deals that imperialists make about who gets to exploit what labor or resources always break down, because some powers are getting stronger and demand more while some are becoming relatively weaker, but refuse to give up what they control. In the 20th century, Japan, Germany and the US were rising powers, challenging the old empires. Now China is a rising power, challenging the US, in line with the dialectics of imperialist rivalry.

Universal Connection

From his study of Hegel, Lenin put a big emphasis on the idea the “all-sidedness and all-embracing character interconnection of the world.” Every actual thing or process has complex connections with many different things and processes in the world. A full understanding of anything, therefore, requires that all these connections be explored, a process that can never be fully completed.

Lenin took an ordinary drinking glass as an example of the many aspects of a thing. The glass is a cylinder, but it “can be used as a missile; it can serve as a paper weight, a receptacle for a captive butterfly, or a valuable object with an artistic engraving or design, and this has nothing at all to do with whether or not it can be used for drinking, is made of glass, is cylindrical,” etc.

Which aspect of the glass is important to us depends on our needs and interests. Someone

who wants to get a drink of water doesn't care what color the glass is, but does care whether it has any holes in it. "A full 'definition' of an object," however, "must include the whole of human experience, both as a criterion of truth and a practical indicator of its connection with human wants."

Lenin's Understanding of Idealism

Leaving out important aspects of something or giving too much importance to other aspects is a mistaken way of understanding something that called "one-sidedness." Lenin argued that we should consider idealism to be one-sided, rather than just stupidity or ignorance, as the old, pre-dialectical materialism had seen it.

Lenin concluded that Hegel's "thought of the ideal passing into the real is profound, ... it is clear that this contains much truth." The old, mechanical materialism saw ideas not as causes but only as effects of what is real, and denied that ideas can have results in the world. Lenin saw that ideas can become real if they motivate people to create something new, a concept central to the fight for communism. The error of idealism was its failure to connect the process of realizing ideas with matter and nature. "Intelligent [i.e., dialectical] idealism," he wrote, "is closer to intelligent [dialectical] materialism than stupid [dead, crude, rigid] materialism."

Dialectic Logic and Practice

Lenin's notes show his materialist reinterpretation of Hegel's ideas about practice, that is, purposeful human action. The path for learning the truth is "from living perception to abstract thought, and from this to practice." Even the principles of dialectics have been extracted from billions of repetitions of practical actions and then "serve people in practice."

Lenin's Influence on Dialectics

Lenin's leadership and his own study and writing about dialectics had a profound influence on philosophy in the international communist movement. Lenin insisted that the party organize study of Hegel, but also of Plekhanov. The Bolsheviks decisively rejected the reformist, anti-dialectical philosophy that had been dominant in European socialism prior to the Bolshevik revolution in 1917. Unfortunately it took long struggles until the early 1930s for the main ideas of dialectics to be formulated and adopted in the USSR, formulations which were subject to decisive weaknesses, as we will see.

Mechanist Philosophy in the USSR

This column is the first of several about the development of dialectics in the USSR in the 1920s and '30s. This was a period of intense struggle over the basic principles of dialectics and the application of these principles to politics and economics. In this column and the next one, we will discuss the false philosophy of change called "mechanism" or mechanical materialism.

The part of the science of physics that deals with forces and the changes in motion that forces cause is called "mechanics." Mechanics has specific laws that determine how forces combine. In particular, forces of equal strength that push in opposite directions cancel each other out and cause no change in motion.

Mechanism

Philosophical mechanism is modeled on some aspects of mechanics. It was advocated in

particular by Nicolai Bukharin, an influential Bolshevik leader, who used mechanism to defend his pro-capitalist policies. In the philosophy textbook that he wrote, Bukharin defined a contradiction as “antagonism of forces acting in different directions.” This conception of contradiction leads to very serious errors.

One problem with this definition is that it isn't just forces that can be contradictory. Marx saw that the tendency of the rate of profit to fall is contradicted by a fall in wages, but tendencies and wage cuts are not forces. Not only tendencies, but other things like requirements and ideas, can be the sides of a contradiction. Bukharin also did not explain what antagonism is and how it differs from contradiction.

Unity of Opposites is Critical

The main problem, however, is that Bukharin said nothing about how the sides of a contradiction are connected. Dialectical contradictions combine both struggle and unity of opposites. Opposites have a connection of mutual dependence, called an “organic relation.” Bukharin denied that any organic relation was necessary, but the unity of a contradiction is in fact essential.

One important kind of connection of opposites is each side coming to mirror its opposite. In a soccer game, each team tries to undermine its opponent's strengths and overcome its own weaknesses. Against an opponent with a star striker, a team may assign several midfielders to mark him or her. Against another opponent, it will organize its players differently. Each side is partly determined by its opposite.

Opposites can also get inside each other. Since the bosses know that they can't prevent workers from fighting back, they use their laws, the media, bribery, etc., to try to give pro-boss leadership to workers' struggles and weaken them. Opposites penetrate each other. This is a fundamental fact of dialectics which is ignored by mechanists.

Since mechanical forces can cancel each other out, Bukharin said this can happen in a contradiction. “We then have a state of ‘rest,’ i.e., their actual ‘conflict’ is concealed.” Bukharin applied this idea to the conflict of rival imperialists, He claimed that empires that are equally matched can come to agreements with each other “when there is equality of forces, when victory is beyond belief, when struggle is hopeless.”

The example of imperialist rivalry shows that Bukharin was fundamentally wrong about this. The intensity of conflict between empires of approximately equal strength can be very high, as it was between the US and the USSR in the 1960s, '70s and '80s. Even when they avoid direct military confrontation with each other, imperialists back wars fought by smaller forces that they sponsor. The Soviets did this against the US in Vietnam in the '60s and Egypt in the '70s. The US did the same in Afghanistan in the '80s and in Israel for many decades.

Contradictions between sides which are both strong enough to hold back the other tend to be much more intense than those where one side is obviously dominant. Georgia did not resist much when the Russians invaded them in 2008, and Brazil did not put up much of a fight against Germany in the world cup.

Because contradictions have both struggle and unity, because the sides reflect each other and penetrate each other, dialectical contradictions are not very similar to combinations of forces in physics. In particular, their sides don't cancel out.

More Mechanist Philosophy in the USSR

In our last column, we began to look into “mechanism” (or “mechanical materialism”), an influential trend in capitalist philosophy for a long time. We saw how the Soviet mechanists’ claim that the sides of a contradiction don’t need to be connected led to completely wrong ideas about imperialist rivalries. The mechanist idea of taking the science of mechanics as a model for all change had far worse results than that, however.

Rejecting Qualitative Change

Typically, mechanists saw mechanics as a science that studies only quantities, that is, things that can be measured with numbers. Since they thought that mechanics is the most basic science, they often concluded that qualities and qualitative changes are not real. Despite the fact that qualitative changes, like boiling water to make steam, are studied in other parts of physics, some Soviet mechanists argued that qualitative change was not an objective scientific fact, but depends on an observer’s point of view.

They claimed that having or not having a certain quality depends on which properties people single out because of their own interests. Thus they rejected the dialectical law of the transformation of quantity into quality. Other mechanists rejected this law because they claimed (falsely) that mechanics has a “law of continuity,” so a sudden qualitative change—like a revolution—is not a real phenomenon.

Fantasies of Equilibrium

Another typical mechanist view was borrowed from thermodynamics, the physical theory of heat transfer. It is a law of thermodynamics that an isolated system, that is, one that does not exchange matter or energy with its surroundings, will tend toward a steady state called “equilibrium.” A system in equilibrium has no tendency to change unless affected by some external cause. Mechanists treated this tendency to equilibrium as if it applied to all systems, not just isolated ones. They claimed that people and societies always move toward equilibrium unless disturbed from the outside. This means that internal causes, and class struggle in particular, are not the causes of historical change. Mechanists saw social conflicts as tending to die out on their own and reach equilibrium. This is the opposite of Marxism.

The mechanist claim that societies strive toward equilibrium was actually based on completely bogus physics. Physics does not require that non-isolated systems move toward equilibrium. In fact, a human being who is not exchanging matter and energy with his or her surroundings must be dead! A society isolated from sources of matter and energy is impossible. This whole argument was pseudo-science.

Bad Dialectics Matters

The wrong idea that every system tends toward equilibrium really mattered in the debates in the USSR in the 1920s over creating a collective agriculture. At that time almost all food was produced by peasants. The food supplied to city workers was largely controlled by rural capitalists called “kulaks” (“fists”), who were hostile to the Soviet government. In line with his mechanist ideas, Nicolai Bukharin, an important political leader at the time, viewed the conflict with the kulaks as gradually dying out. He advocated being nice to the kulaks by producing more consumer goods that would encourage them to produce more grain.

Stalin had the opposite view. He eventually recognized that the class struggle with the kulaks would not die out gradually, but would become more intense. This became obvious when the kulaks withheld grain from the cities in 1928 and workers had to be sent to the

countryside to take it. The kulaks were exploiters who would resist their class being eliminated and “the resistance of the exploiters cannot but lead to the inevitable sharpening of the class struggle,” as Stalin said. This conclusion was right in line with dialectics. As long as classes exist, contradictions between classes (and most other contradictions, too) tend to become more intense and can only be resolved that way. The mechanist ideas that qualitative change is not objective, that conflicts tend to die out on their own, or, as we discussed in the previous column, that the opposite sides of a contradiction tend to cancel out, all lead to wrong conclusions and harm the fight for communism.

Soviet Russia in the 1920s:

Rediscovery and Development of Dialectical Materialism

It was not easy to learn dialectical materialism in the USSR in the 1920s. There were two reasons for this. One was the lack of good study materials. There were very few books that gave simple, correct explanations of what dialectical materialism is and how it can be used in the fight for communism.

The second reason was that much of the writing on dialectical materialism was done by revisionists, especially by so-called Mensheviks. These people still had the old social-democratic politics and a wrong philosophy to go along with it. Some advocated the anti-dialectical mechanist philosophy discussed in previous columns, a view supported by some Soviet leaders. Others advocated dialectics, but their version of it was much more about harmony than Lenin’s dialectics of revolution.

These two weaknesses of Soviet philosophy are closely connected. Since the Bolshevik party lacked a well-developed party position on the main issues of dialectical materialism, they were not in a position to teach it to the masses. This situation only improved after a ten-year struggle, ending about 1932. This column will give a sketch of that struggle.

New Sources

One important weapon in the fight for dialectical materialism was the Soviet publication of previously unknown works by Marx, Engels and Lenin. Marx’s early critique of Hegel’s dialectics, Engels book on the dialectics of nature, and Lenin’s notes on his study of Hegel were all published in the 1920s. These works were very important for rediscovering what was already known about dialectical materialism, and supporting those fighting for a good line.

The Fight Against Mechanism

The anti-dialectical mechanist philosophy had considerable support among natural scientists and was used in the party’s campaigns against religion. The main struggle against this philosophy was fought by students of the ex-Menshevik Avram Deborin, a follower of Plekhanov. The Deborinites conducted a long campaign against mechanism in books, conferences and academic journals. After a vote at a big conference in 1929, mechanism was declared defeated and condemned by the party leadership.

The Deborinites’ criticism of mechanism was valuable, but their own philosophy had serious faults. Soon some communist philosophy students who had recently graduated from the party’s Institute of Red Professors began to attack Deborinite philosophy and Stalin encouraged them to keep it up. The Deborinites were criticized for a number of things, including: (1) that they

hadn't absorbed Lenin's advances over the old social-democratic philosophy, (2) that their philosophy was completely removed from the party's practical work, its political struggles and campaign of economic construction, and (3) they did not see their job as developing and defending a party-wide position in philosophy.

Unlike Marx, Deborin claimed that Hegel had been essentially right about dialectics, saying that "in general the Hegelian construction must be considered correct also from the materialist point of view." He endorsed the idea that when a contradiction is resolved, the two sides form a higher unity where "they do not conflict." Marx's revolutionary idea that the two sides of a contradiction "fight to a decision" and one defeats the other was dismissed by the Deborinites when it was first published in 1927.

Spread of dialectics: 1933 Soviet text, 1937 English text, 1950s Spanish text, Mao Zedong's notes on Soviet texts.

Overcoming the Deborinites

After extensive debate the Deborinites were removed from their assignments in 1931. The students who had started the campaign against them were given the responsibility of developing improved formulations of dialectical materialism and creating new textbooks for wide use. Two textbooks were written, one by a group in Moscow and the other in Leningrad. These books were eventually translated into other languages and established what we still take to be the basic contents of dialectics. Both texts were translated into Chinese and studied extensively in China, strongly influencing Mao Zedong's writings on philosophy.

These texts were a big step forward, but Soviet philosophy in the 1930s also had serious shortcomings. We will discuss some of them in our next column.



All Contradictions Are Antagonistic

(See the following letter on the appropriateness of this title)

In our last column we described the Soviet textbooks that set up a new standard presentation of dialectics. This presentation was based on Engels' three laws of dialectics and a list of opposite categories like actuality and possibility, appearance and essence, etc.

Soviet dialectics texts spread with the world communist movement and were translated into various languages. An English version of the Leningrad textbook appeared in 1937. Chinese students who studied in Japan used the Japanese and Russian versions to produce Chinese translations, which proved fundamental to the development of communist philosophy in China.

While the Soviet version of dialectics advanced the knowledge of dialectics world-wide, it also contained a fundamental error. This error was a philosophical version of the idea that socialism, with its wage system and inequality, leads to communism, and does so without a new revolution. This wrong idea is the so-called "non-antagonistic contradiction."

In his study of dialectics, Russian communist leader V. I. Lenin came to the profound conclusion that unity is not the main aspect of a contradiction: “The unity ... of opposites is conditional, temporary, transitory, relative. The struggle of mutually exclusive opposites is absolute, just as development and motion are absolute.” This means that the struggle inside a contradiction does not tend to die out, but eventually becomes more intense and is resolved by the destruction of at least one side of it.

Socialist Dialectics

Beginning about 1930, Russian communists developed a different view of dialectics. They started to use the term “non-antagonistic contradiction” and its political counterpart, the concept of a “non-antagonistic class relationship.” This amounted to the claim that socialism doesn’t have the exploitation and class struggle that capitalism has. The Soviet textbooks defended the idea that the contradictions of socialism would gradually die out on their own or can be “managed” so that they don’t become intense and lead to rebellions and revolutions.

The actual history of the USSR and China showed that this picture is fundamentally wrong. In the USSR, the contradictions that existed between the working class and the peasants who sold them food led repeatedly to peasant resistance and sometimes to mass protests. In a grand compromise in the mid-’30s, peasants were organized into collective farms but allowed to keep their private plots and animals and sell their products. This private business constantly interfered with the operation of the collective economy.

More important than the peasant question was the growth of a new class of capitalists consisting of party leaders, factory managers and military officers. A series of internal struggles included large-scale arrests and executions in the ‘30s, and local rebellions by workers in the ‘50s. By the 1960s, workers’ political power in the USSR had been defeated and replaced by a wealthy “red” bourgeoisie that renounced revolution and advocated “peaceful coexistence” with imperialism, as it became an imperialist power itself.

No Contradictions are “Non-Antagonistic”

Scientific study of how contradictions are resolved, including the analysis of the evidence from class struggle, war, and natural science, etc., leads to the following conclusion:

Contradictions are only resolved or moved toward resolution by intensifying the struggle of their opposite sides, by increasing their negative relationship to each other, eventually destroying one (or both) sides. The way a contradiction is made more intense depends on the particular processes inside it.

The idea that the contradictions of socialism were “non-antagonistic,” that they could be safely ignored or “managed” out of existence was a disastrous myth. This myth disguised the capitalist nature of socialism and made it seem harmless to keep the wage system, rather than turning to communism. Communist dialectics recognizes that contradictions don’t die out, but are resolved by struggle and intensification, an idea essential for the mass mobilization for communism.

More on Contradictions

Dear **Red Flag**,

In the last issue, **Red Flag** published an article on the history of dialectics, called “All

Contradictions are Antagonistic.” I think this title is a serious mistake. The article argues, correctly, that the Soviet concept of “non-antagonistic” contradiction is a bogus idea, used to cover up the internal conflicts of socialism. But the concept of antagonistic contradiction doesn’t make sense, either. What is antagonistic supposed to mean? Soviet writers claimed that antagonism is a kind of social relation that is produced by exploitation. That certainly is not present in all contradictions. Others claimed that antagonistic contradictions have to be resolved by violence. This is certainly not true of contradictions in the party. Many other definitions have been tried out, but the best view, I think, is to recognize that “antagonistic contradiction” is a bogus category, invented to try to make “non-antagonistic contradiction” seem to be a legitimate notion. This concept was never used by Marx, Engels or Lenin, and our use of it can only create confusion.

---A dialectics student

The Contradictions of Socialism

In the last column on the history of dialectics, we discussed a fundamentally mistaken idea developed in the USSR in the 1930s, the so-called non-antagonistic contradictions (NACs). Soviet writers never settled on a single explanation of what was supposed to make a contradiction antagonistic or not. They did claim, however, that the contradictions of socialist society do not tend to become intense, lead to crises and explosions, or require violence in order to be resolved. This is just the opposite of what actually happened in the USSR and later in China.

Wrong as the NAC idea was, it did have an important correct aspect. Contradictions within the party or the working class are not resolved the same way as our contradictions with capitalists and their agents, the politicians, generals, cops, union leaders etc. Both contradictions inside the party and contradictions between workers and bosses can be resolved only by a struggle. Struggle makes contradictions develop, that is, it makes the sides of the contradiction become more clearly defined and the conflict between the two sides sharper. The difference between many contradictions within the party and contradictions between the masses and the bosses is the way that these contradictions develop and become intense. Party members share (or should share) a common commitment to figure out the truth and use it to find the best way to communism. Their contradictions are about which line is best. The Bolsheviks (Soviet communists) called the process of working out the best line “criticism and self-criticism.” Even before the revolution Lenin had written:

“Frankly admitting a mistake, figuring out the reasons for it, analyzing the circumstances which gave rise to it, and thoroughly discussing the means of correcting it—that is the earmark of a serious party; that is the way it should perform its duties, that is the way it should educate and train the class, and then the masses.”

Bolshevik philosophers often claimed that all NACs could be resolved by criticism and self-criticism. In one of many confusions about NACs, however, they correctly recognized that debates in the party can become very intense and sharply defined. Descriptions like “the fire of self-criticism” or “burning issues” were common in the 1930s discussions of supposed NACs.

This confusion can be cleared up this way: when people are committed to finding the right

line, their contradictions are primarily between ideas. Contradictions between these ideas become intense and if they are resolved, this happens by most people being won over to see one line as the best. Errors are defeated, not the people who made them.

This way of understanding things will only be correct if most of the party members are willing to accept and acknowledge their own errors in order to find the best ideas to advance the interests of the masses. This is a situation that has to be fought for and maintained by good leadership.

Even the best leadership cannot achieve this under socialism, however. In socialism there is a hierarchy of income and privileges, and the leaders that have those privileges fight to keep and extend them.

From its early days, top party and state officials in the USSR had a much higher standard of living than the masses. Some of them did not want to risk their privileges in the intense struggle to collectivize agriculture and create heavy industry and a powerful army. In the late 1930s, as it seemed more and more likely that the USSR would be fighting a battle to the death with Nazi Germany or the Japanese Empire or both, groups of former party leaders whose policies had been defeated in the internal debate conspired to kill Stalin and other top leaders. Some of the conspirators were officials of the government police forces, who used their positions to kill many people and undermine the party leadership. Soviet archives opened in the 1990s show that over 600,000 people were executed in 1937-8, many of whom had committed no crime. (Anti-communist writers have made up far higher figures.)

No matter what kind of explanation of “non-antagonistic contradictions” is cooked up, the facts show that NACs didn’t apply to Soviet reality (or anywhere else). Under communism, however, mass mobilization and leaders without privileges will be able to resolve most social contradictions by wide debate, which will sometimes become intense, as resolution requires.

Stalin's Dialectics

In a 1957 speech to a meeting of the world’s communist parties, Mao Zedong claimed that Stalin had “developed metaphysics [i.e., non-dialectical thinking] and harmed dialectics.... Stalin had a very metaphysical viewpoint.” Some others have described Stalin as a mechanical, undialectical thinker. These claims represent an undialectical view of Stalin, whose relation to dialectics changed drastically over his lifetime.

Stalin understood that the class struggle does not end or die out after the working class seizes power, but becomes more intense until capitalism is completely wiped out. As early as 1906, he defended dialectics against anarchism. He wrote that until the capitalists are completely destroyed and all their wealth confiscated, the working class must have a “proletarian guard,” a military force that can defeat the “counterrevolutionary attacks of the dying bourgeoisie.”

After the October revolution, Stalin applied this idea to the struggle to defeat rural capitalists (“kulaks”) who controlled much of the food supply for the cities. “The more we advance,” he said, “the greater will be the resistance of the capitalist elements and the sharper the class struggle.... It never has been and never will be the case that a dying class surrenders its positions voluntarily without attempting to organize resistance.”

This correct idea was opposed by other leaders of the Russian communists. Bukharin claimed that the capitalists would realize that they had lost power and had to submit to rule by the

working class. He advocated economic policies to encourage the rural capitalists to produce more. The 1928 “grain strike,” when capitalists would not sell grain and armed workers had to go and seize it to keep the cities from starving, exposed the disastrous nature of Bukharin’s policy and led the communists to begin collectivizing agriculture and eliminating the rural capitalist class.

Stalin’s influence on philosophy in the USSR was not limited to writing and speeches. He encouraged younger comrades to criticize wrong views of the Deborinites (discussed in a previous column), which eventually led to widely used textbooks of dialectics. On the other side, Stalin pushed the development of the seriously wrong idea of “non-antagonistic contradictions,” also discussed previously.

In 1938 the party published a “short course” on its own history. Stalin wrote one section, which became the pamphlet “Dialectical and Historical Materialism.” This pamphlet was hailed by the Soviet press as a terrific advance, but in fact it was a retreat.

The pamphlet omitted one of Engels’ three laws of dialectics, the law of the negation of the negation. This law says that while history doesn’t repeat itself, partial reversals are possible. Stalin’s view was that the accomplishments of socialist construction up to that point were irreversible. But Engels’ law suggests that reversals are possible. Stalin left this law out, without explanation.

A second mistake in the pamphlet was less obvious. Dialectics holds that the internal contradictions in processes are the main factors in determining how those processes change. Thus the internal contradictions of capitalism are the main cause of its growth and destruction. Lenin had emphasized this point, and the Soviet textbooks of the early 1930s had said so clearly: “The causes of development are not found outside a process, but inside it.” (1932 Leningrad textbook) Mechanists, who opposed dialectics, claimed that it is external factors like geography or climate that determine social development.

In the pamphlet, Stalin wrote that the struggle of the opposite sides of contradictions “constitute the inner content of development.” He did not, however, say that this inner content is decisive or make a clear statement about the relative importance of internal contradictions and external circumstances. This fact, and the omission of Engels’ law are steps backwards in dialectical philosophy.

These steps corresponded to decisive political steps back in USSR in the late 1930s. The biggest of these was the “united front against fascism,” which tried to make an alliance between communists and “good” capitalists, those who were willing to oppose fascism. This “united front” meant ending the demand for world proletarian revolution. In the USSR, Stalin tried but failed to get the communist party to organize elections where the enemies of the revolution (families of rural capitalists, Tsarist officers, priests, etc.) could vote for opposition parties.

There is an unbreakable link between dialectics and revolution. Stalin fought for dialectics, but eventually retreated from real dialectics while he retreated from communist revolution.

The Development of Communist Dialectics in China

For at least three decades after the founding of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 1921,

the main source of communist philosophy was the Soviet Union. Some early Chinese access to Russian dialectical materialism came from the few Chinese leftists who could read Russian, but the larger source was Soviet material published by Japanese communists. Translations from Japanese and writings by Chinese students who had studied in Japan were key sources for several decades.

An important early writer on communist philosophy was Qu Quibai. He studied Russian and worked as a reporter in Russia, where he became a communist. In 1923 he taught Marxist philosophy at the newly founded Shanghai University, and became a member of the central committee of the CPC. Beginning in 1924 Qu published several influential books that explained key concepts of communist philosophy.

One of Qu's main interests in communist theory was the role of conscious political action within the framework of the inevitability of the victory of communism. Initially Qu's knowledge of Soviet philosophy was more an obstacle than a help on this issue, since he tried to use the anti-dialectical "mechanist" viewpoint that all changes are caused from the outside. This wrong view was still influential in Russia until the late 1920s (See *Red Flag*, 10/02/14), but was defeated in the early 1930s in the philosophical debates in Russia (See *Red Flag*, 11/13/14).

The Soviet debates deepened and clarified dialectical materialism and produced several widely used textbooks. The improved Soviet philosophy was often called the "new philosophy" in China. Qu accepted this new philosophy, including its idea that it is the internal contradictions in things, not external factors, which are the main cause of development. Qu Quibai was executed by the nationalist Guomindang in 1935.

Another major figure of the new philosophy in China was Li Da, who translated a number of Japanese-language Marxist philosophy textbooks by Russian, German and Japanese writers. Later he was co-translator of one of the Soviet textbooks on the new philosophy. An early member of the CPC, he left the party in 1923 and did not rejoin until 1949. His translations and his own writing had a wide influence, however.

Li's most important work was called *Elements of Sociology*. Published in 1935, it contained a long section on Marxist philosophy. This work developed the most important themes of dialectics and materialism, including dialectical contradictions driving change, qualitative versus quantitative change, and that knowledge is a dialectical process that proceeds from human practice and returns to guide practice.

Although theoretically rigorous, Li Da's works were not aimed at the mass audience that the communist movement needs to reach. Popularization and defense of dialectical materialism were the main aims of the philosophical work of Ai Siqi, a generation younger than Li and Qu. Ai was educated in Japan and learned Marxism and the Russian language there. He was co-translator of an important Soviet textbook. He edited a magazine that explained the new philosophy and wrote several very influential books on communist philosophy including *Philosophy for the Masses* (1936) and *Philosophy and Life* (1937).



Ai Siqi



Ai worked hard to make communist philosophy available to the masses, using popular culture. He used the film comedian Charlie Chaplin, immensely popular in China, to illustrate various ideas from dialectical materialism. In one of his magazine columns, Ai described the difference between perception and theory this way: The first stage of knowledge is perceptual knowledge, the kind we get by seeing, feeling and smelling. Perceptual knowledge is essential but it must be expanded and corrected by reasoning. Their mustaches make Charlie Chaplin and Hitler look similar superficially, but more careful examination can tell them apart. Reasoning and theoretical knowledge is often necessary to overcome the superficial similarities in perception.

Despite the contributions of the philosophers mentioned here, Mao Zedong was by far the most influential communist philosopher in China. Taking over the new philosophy, he acknowledged that he learned a lot from the others mentioned here. From intensive collective study in the liberated area in Yan'an China in 1936-37, he produced a summary of dialectical materialism from which two important essays were extracted, "On Practice," and "On Contradiction." Our next two columns will discuss these important essays.

Mao's "On Practice"

In the last article we described the spread of the Soviet formulation of dialectical materialism in China, which was called the "new philosophy" there. In 1936 and 1937 Mao Zedong (and a study group he led) carefully studied the Soviet textbooks and the work of Chinese communist philosophers, and produced the manuscript *Lecture Notes on Dialectical Materialism*.

The topics and the views advocated in this text are quite similar to the Soviet texts, but also emphasized the specific situation in China. Two essays from this work were widely circulated, "On Practice" and "On Contradiction." Here we give a brief outline of "On Practice," but the whole article is worth studying carefully.

Mao wrote that social practice alone is the source of all our knowledge and the criterion of truth. "Social practice" includes a variety of activities, but the three most important are production, class struggle, and scientific experiments. The most fundamental of these is material production. In production, people come to understand their relationship to nature and to varying degrees, the social relations among people. Production is "the primary source from which human knowledge develops." The rise of the working class and large-scale production makes possible a comprehensive, scientific understanding of society, which is Marxism.

Mao wrote that for knowledge of the world, human social practice is the "sole criterion of truth." This means that when we make plans and base them on what we think is true, the practical result shows whether our thinking was right or not. Success is evidence that our thinking is true or close to the truth. Failure shows that we must revise our ideas and test the new ideas in practice. Mao divided knowledge into two stages. The first stage is information about phenomena. Phenomena are what can be perceived by the senses or are easily recognized, superficial information that doesn't show hidden connections between things. Mao's example: what visitors might learn from a tour of the Yan'an liberated area.

The second stage requires the formation of concepts that can be applied to phenomena and explain them. These concepts have to be thought up in the course of trying to understand the phenomena, "arranging and reconstructing" the data of perception.

Concepts are qualitatively different from the phenomena they apply to. They show the true nature and inner connection of the phenomena and allow logical conclusions to be drawn. The result is knowledge of true theories, which Mao calls "logical" or "rational" knowledge.

Quoting Lenin, Mao cites “matter,” “laws of nature” and (economic) “value” as examples of concepts.

The first, perceptual stage of knowledge is the basis for the second, higher theoretical stage, so that “all knowledge originates in perception of the objective external world through man’s physical sense organs.” Knowledge from both perceptual and theoretical stages is needed to guide practice, and can be corrected when practice goes wrong.

Mao distinguished between a person’s direct experience and his or her indirect experience, information from the experience of other people. Although he wrote that most knowledge comes from indirect experience, Mao insisted that specific kinds of knowledge require personal participation. “If you want to know the structure and properties of the atom you must make physical and chemical experiments to change the state of the atom. If you want to know the theory and methods of revolution, you must take part in revolution.”

Mao discusses several wrong views in the theory of knowledge that have important consequences for the communist movement. One error is to think that knowledge can stop at the first, perceptual stage, and that rational knowledge is not reliable. This anti-theory view is called “empiricism.” Empiricism fails to understand that perceptual knowledge is superficial and one-sided, and fails to get to the essence, to the inner laws that govern a thing and reflect its totality.

The second serious error is “rationalism,” a view that sees theory as independent of perceptual knowledge. Rational knowledge always depends on perceptual knowledge derived from practice, and needs to be corrected by failures and partial successes in practice. Thus the internal contradictions of knowledge drive the process of the growth of knowledge.

The whole point of rational knowledge, knowledge of true theories, is to reveal the essence and inner nature of things, which makes consistent success in practice possible. In particular, rational knowledge of communist politics, economics and philosophy is essential to guide our struggle for communism.

Mao Zedong’s “On Contradiction,” Part I

The previous column in the series on the history of dialectics gave a brief summary of Mao’s essay “On Practice.” This week’s column is the first of several analyzing Mao’s essay “On Contradiction.”

It is hard to exaggerate the influence that this one essay by Mao has had. It is likely that more people alive now have read it than any other text on dialectics. Compared to other works explaining the “new philosophy” that was developed in the 1930s in the Soviet Union, it is quite clear, and much of what it says is correct. It also lays out the Chinese Communist Party’s version of the tremendously destructive political line adopted by the international communist movement in 1935, the “united front against fascism.” Since this wrong political line leads to wrong philosophy, it is important to separate what is correct in the essay from what is false and reactionary.

Two World Outlooks

The essay begins by explaining the difference between metaphysics and dialectics, two ways of looking at the universe and how it changes.



The metaphysical way of thinking sees the world as made up of isolated, unchanging things. It sees things as static and stable, not changing at all or at most changing by the increase or decrease in the quantity of something. Metaphysical thinking claims to find capitalist exploitation and competition in all past human societies, even before social classes arose. It sees the changes that do happen as the result of external forces like geography and climate.

Mao's essay explains the outlook of materialist dialectics, which says that things undergo real changes in quality, changes that produce what never existed before. These changes are not primarily the result of external forces, but of the internal conflict, the "contradictoriness" inside things and processes. Great social changes don't result mainly from geography and climate, but from internal social forces. China was undergoing big changes when Mao wrote but the climate was not. It was internal factors, especially class conflict, which was driving these changes, although some external circumstances are also required. Changes in nature are also mainly the result of internal contradictions.

Mao gave examples that make clearer the idea that changes come from the inside. If it is kept at the right temperature for a while, a fertilized egg turns into a baby chicken, but "no temperature can change a stone into a chicken." The temperature is necessary for the chicken to develop, but what is internal to the egg drives the process of creating a chicken.

Mao applied this internal analysis to war: "In battle, one army is victorious and the other is defeated, and both the victory and the defeat are determined by internal causes." The winning side had strength and good leadership. The losing side was weak or had incompetent leadership.

We should note that Mao is not saying simply that the stronger side wins. A weak army whose leaders understand their weaknesses does not have to be defeated. It can retreat or use hit-and-run tactics. Mao makes a similar point about the defeat of the communists by Chinese capitalist forces in 1927, caused by political mistakes ("opportunism") within the communist party. He concludes that "to lead the revolution to victory," the party must "depend on the correctness of its political line and the solidity of its own organization."

The Universality of Contradiction

Mao wrote that contradiction is universal in two ways. The first is that there are contradictions in everything in nature and in society, and these contradictions determine how the thing develops and changes. The second is that opposite sides of the contradictions in a process exist from its beginning to its end. Mao repeated arguments and examples from Engels and Lenin to show that contradictions are universal, unfortunately repeating Engels' incorrect claim that motion is itself a contradiction (this mistake was discussed in *Red Flag*, February 20, 2014). Mao also gave his own examples of interconnected opposites in war, like offense and defense or advance and retreat. This network of opposites "constitutes the totality of war, pushes its development forward and solves its problems."

Mao's discussion of the universality of contradictions is intended to introduce one of the main topics of the essay, the "particularity of contradiction." We will discuss this in the next column.

Mao Zedong's "On Contradiction," Part II

In our last issue we began to work through this very influential essay. This time we will discuss serious errors in Mao's article.

The Particularity of Contradiction

Contradictions in the different forms of motion of matter are qualitatively different. The contradictions in a moving car, in the circulation of money in a capitalist economy or in the growth of knowledge are all different, and each has its own essential features. Understanding these different contradictions requires finding their specific concrete features.

Mao wrote that different contradictions must be resolved in different ways. His examples included resolving the worker-capitalist contradiction by revolution and contradictions inside the party by criticism and self-criticism.

Mao was right that contradictions are resolved in different ways, but he does not explain what various kinds of resolution have in common. The most important common characteristic they have is that contradictions are resolved by becoming more intense, by the two sides of the contradiction interfering with each other more and more.

A contradiction does not die out gradually. The capitalists do not give up and become workers; they fight harder the stronger the communist movement gets. Contradictions inside the party don't just disappear; they are only resolved by intense discussions that win over most people to one view.

Mao did not explain that resolution needs intensification because he did not believe this. He thought that resolution required struggle, but that in certain contradictions, called "non-antagonistic," struggle does not have to become more intense to produce resolution. We have discussed this wrong view before (see *Red Flag*, 12/4/2014) and will have more to say about it in Part III.

Fundamental Contradictions and Principal Contradictions

Mao adopted from Soviet sources the important distinction between a fundamental contradiction and a principal contradiction, but his views about principal contradictions are seriously wrong.

The fundamental contradiction in a process influences that process from beginning to end, like the contradiction between capitalists and workers under capitalism, but it isn't always the strongest contradiction. A principal or main contradiction is the one that has the greatest influence on a process or system at any one time. The main contradiction can shift from one contradiction to another, but the fundamental contradiction remains the same (*Red Flag*, 9/19/2013).

In 2015 the main contradiction in the world is between imperialist powers, especially between the US and China. Working-class activism and capitalist repression express the fundamental worker-boss contradiction, but right now that conflict has less effect than the intensifying contradictions among imperialists.

Mao wrote that the main contradiction in China in the late '30s was the contradiction between the Chinese nation and Japanese imperialism. He claimed that class struggle within China, the fundamental contradiction, was only a secondary contradiction at that time.

For Mao the importance of the main contradiction was that you must give highest priority to resolving the main contradiction. This meant more effort to fight Japan than to fight class enemies. Mao said that the communists should actually ally themselves with their class enemies (capitalists and landlords) to fight Japan. He attacked communists who rejected allying with the capitalists who had killed tens of thousands of communists in the previous decade. Mao claimed that Japan was the "main target" and if you don't shoot all your bullets at the main target, they will be wasted. Mao tried to use dialectics to defend this reactionary policy, which meant abandoning revolutionary political work until Japan was defeated.

Resolve the Fundamental Contradiction!

Mao was dead wrong about the significance of the principal contradiction. Communists don't have to fight directly to resolve that contradiction. Doing that in 2015 would probably mean supporting one group of imperialists against others. Instead, communists should fight to mobilize the masses so that the main contradiction changes, so that the fundamental contradiction, capitalists vs. workers, becomes the main contradiction. Communists should work to resolve that contradiction as their primary task, dealing with other contradictions when necessary to advance the fight for communism. In particular we should use the weaknesses that the contradictions between imperialists produce—especially imperialist war—to resolve the fundamental contradiction with communist revolution.

Mao Zedong's "On Contradiction," Part III

Part II of our discussion of Mao's "On Contradiction," showed that he used the concept of main contradiction to justify making temporary alliances with the enemies of the working class. Despite this misuse, Mao was right that there has to be one contradiction that has the greatest influence on a process at a particular time, and that is the main (or principal) contradiction.

The Main Aspect of a Contradiction

Mao was also right that the two sides of a contradiction do not balance each other. One side is the main or dominant one at any specific time. Under capitalism, the capitalists are the dominant side in the capitalist-worker contradiction, but a successful revolution makes the working class the dominant side. In a contradiction inside a worker, commitment to the working class can be dominant or selfishness and individualism can have the upper hand. Inside an atom of matter, the forces of attraction can be dominant or the tendency to come apart may be stronger.

Mao argued that the dominance of one side of a contradiction is not permanent. Conditions can occur in which the main aspect changes into the weaker one, and the previously weaker side becomes the main one. Mao claimed that in the contradiction between the forces of production and the social relations of production, either side can become the main aspect, given the right circumstances.

Dialectical Identity

Mao called the shift of the main aspect of a contradiction from one side to the other side "transformation into the opposite." When two things are united by the possibility of one transforming into another in this way, Mao called them "identical." He also called the connection between the two sides of a contradiction a kind of identity. Things that can turn into each other, like peace and war, or health and disease, must be connected. Things that can struggle against each other, like communism and revisionism, must be connected.

This connection, this dialectical "identity," is always combined with struggle. Following Lenin, Mao said that struggle is absolute and identity is limited and temporary. Eventually, contradictions come apart and are resolved.

Antagonism and Contradiction

Along with the correct ideas mentioned here, Mao also borrowed the bogus concepts of

“antagonistic” and “non-antagonistic” contradictions from Soviet philosophy. Soviet writers never settled on a single explanation of what was supposed to make a contradiction antagonistic or not, and Mao does not explain it either. He agreed with the Soviet attempts to defend socialism by claiming that the contradictions of socialist society do not tend to become intense, lead to crises and explosions, or require violence in order to be resolved. This is just the opposite of what actually happened in the USSR and later in China. Socialism is a form of capitalism, subject to the inner laws of capitalism, and its contradictions cannot be resolved without its destruction.

Antagonism means hatred, violence or attempts to destroy, but the word does not name a special kind of contradiction. A contradiction only becomes resolved by becoming more intense, whether it is the contradiction of the sides in a war or a revolution, or a political disagreement among friends. Socialist terminology like “antagonistic” has no more place in dialectics than capitalist ideas like justice or democracy have in working out communist politics. (For more on “antagonistic” contradictions, see *Red Flag*, Dec. 4, 2014 and Feb. 5, 2015).

In comparison with Soviet views, Mao added a new wrinkle to antagonism. He claimed that a contradiction could switch from antagonistic to non-antagonistic, and vice-versa. Mao would later say that the contradiction between the working class and the “national” capitalists in China could become non-antagonistic, which he took to mean resolvable without violence. Thus, like Mao’s errors about the main contradiction, his wrong views about “antagonistic” contradictions were connected with fundamental political errors: alliance with or tolerance of the enemies of the working class.

Despite these defects in Mao’s dialectics, he later developed dialectical materialism in some important ways. We will discuss these advances in the next column.

Mao’s Later Dialectics

Previous articles in this series have discussed Mao Zedong’s philosophical essays up to the defeat of the nationalist Guomindang (GMD) and the formation of a “people’s republic” in 1949. We continue to discuss his role in the philosophical struggles that took place in the 1950s, ‘60s and ‘70s.

In 1957 Mao gave a major speech that was prompted by the right-wing revolt in 1956 against the socialist government of Hungary. The Communist Party of China (CPC) was concerned to prevent something similar from happening in China and Mao tried to make nice with the Chinese bourgeoisie. He introduced a new dialectical concept for this purpose, the distinction between “contradictions among the people” and “contradictions with the enemy.” This distinction has some validity, since conflicts among the masses should certainly not be treated the same way as conflicts between the masses and the capitalist class, which can be resolved only by communist revolution.

“The People” and “The Enemy”

Mao used the concept of “the people,” however, as a flexible category to describe whatever opportunistic alliance the CPC wanted to make with the enemies of the working class at some particular time. He included even feudal landlords and the capitalist GMD among “the people” during the war against Japanese imperialism. After the war, the landlords and the GMD were moved into the category of “the enemy.”

Mao admitted that capitalists exploited workers, but—amazingly—claimed that there is a

“fundamental identity of interests” between the capitalists and the working class! He claimed that the “national bourgeoisie,” those capitalists not working closely with foreign imperialists, were part of “the people,” and that the contradictions between the working class and these capitalists could be resolved peacefully if they were properly handled by the CPC. The violent struggles of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s showed that this idea was merely wishful thinking that strengthened the enemies of the working class.

The Great Leap Forward

From 1957 through 1959 two major overlapping movements took place in China, the Great Leap Forward (GLF), a huge program of economic construction, and the organization of peasants into “People’s Communes,” which was seen as a major step toward communism. Major mistakes in economic planning, topped off by natural disasters, led to big failures in food production. The resulting famine killed millions of people.

The failures of the GLF intensified the contradiction between the pro-communist Left and the pro-capitalist Right inside the CPC. In 1966 this contradiction led to the Cultural Revolution, but in the late ‘50s and early ‘60s it led to a series of philosophical disputes over issues raised by the GLF. Meeting with Mao in late 1958, philosopher Li Da accused Mao of excessive reliance on the “subjective initiative of the masses,” that is, calling on the workers and peasants to commit themselves to making a big effort. Li Da accused Mao of having a “fever” in his brain. He attacked GLF slogans about mass mobilization that Mao defended, like “Think boldly, speak boldly and act boldly,” claiming these ideas were not Marxist. This became a common theme of the Right in the CPC.

The truth is that it was not enthusiasm of the masses that caused failures in food production, but bad leadership from the CPC. The party diverted enormous amounts of labor from agriculture to futile projects, including the attempt to make steel in a huge number of small “backyard blast furnaces,” which produced worthless metal and wasted resources.

Leftists explained that the initiative of the masses is a material force because there is a “dialectical identity of thought and being.” This did not mean that thinking and matter (“being”) are the same, which is an idealist view. It meant that the characteristics of the material world affect our thinking when we learn from practice, and what we think affects the world by guiding human practical actions. This “dialectical identity” idea became the subject of a long debate between Left and Right.

In 1963, Mao endorsed the dialectical identity view in a short essay called “Where Do Correct Ideas Come From?” “Matter,” he wrote, “can be transformed into consciousness and consciousness into matter.” These transformations are “phenomena of everyday life,” since our thinking is affected by the world and our ideas guide the changes we make in the world.

Marx and Engels had already said similar things, so this idea was not new. It is, however, an idea of fundamental importance for the communist movement. It means that the masses can change the world by learning and then applying correct political ideas in the fight for communism.

Mao’s Later Dialectics, Part II

Revisionism means pro-capitalist ideas and policies that claim to be Marxist. In the early 1960s, the Communist Party of China (CPC) was engaged in an ideological fight against the revisionism of the Soviet communist party (CPSU) and against the CPC’s own internal revisionism. As part of this struggle, the CPC organized a conference in Beijing in October 1963

calling on philosophy and social science workers to fight revisionism.

Mao Zedong worked together with Zhou Yang, who gave the main speech at the conference. It reviewed the history of Marxist dialectics and attacked Soviet philosophers who were trying to water down dialectics. These revisionist philosophers claimed that contradictions could be resolved without one side defeating the other, by opposites merging and becoming unified. This wrong idea about resolving contradictions served the Soviet leaders' line that capitalism could be eliminated without revolution, by a "peaceful transition."

"All conservatives and opportunists," Zhou Yang said, "all those who do not desire but fear revolution, dread change and evade or deny contradictions. On the contrary, all revolutionaries who take upon themselves the transformation of the world desire change, courageously face contradictions and resolve them by revolutionary means."

Mao's contribution to this speech included his version of Lenin's idea that the essence of dialectics was "the division of a unity into mutually exclusive opposites and their reciprocal relation." Mao's way of putting this was "in a unified thing, one divides into two, it changes because of the mutual struggle of two parts."

Soon after the anti-revisionist conference, right-winger Yang Xianzhen, head of the CPC's philosophy school, started to teach students that the basic principle of dialectics was not Mao's "one divides into two" but "two combine into one," This slogan expressed the idea that resolving a contradiction means that the two sides merge, precisely the Soviet philosophers' idea that Mao and Zhou had attacked at the conference. This began a year-long public debate on whether the sides of a contradiction can unify or not.

Mao on Resolution of Contradictions

At that time, Marxist philosophy called the result of resolving a contradiction "synthesis." Mao used a number of unofficial channels to give a new formulation of synthesis.

The leftist philosopher Ai Siqi wrote down a very valuable conclusion by Mao from the summer of 1964. Mao said: "Synthesis is just the completed development of one side, the elimination of one side, and the resolution of the contradiction."

In August 1964 Mao gave a talk on philosophy that was published by Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. He said: "How can synthesis happen? The [capitalist] Guomindang and the Communist Party are two opposites. On the mainland synthesis was precisely this way—you all saw it. Their armed forces arrived and we ate them up, piece by piece. There was no synthesis of two peacefully coexisting sides. They do not want peaceful co-existence, they want to eat us up.... One eats up another, big fish eat little fish, this is what synthesis is. No previous writings have described such errors [about synthesis], and my writing also has not described them."

In a speech at Hangzhou in December 1965, Mao added a little more: "To synthesize is just to eat the enemy up. How did we synthesize the Guomindang? We captured rank-and-file soldiers but did not kill them. Some were let go but the greater part replenished our army. We seized all weapons, provisions, and all kinds of equipment.

"Synthesizing the Guomindang was just eating it up, absorbing the larger part, and discarding a small part. This is learned from Marx. Marx removed the outer shell of Hegel's philosophy, absorbed the valuable inner core, and transformed it into materialistic dialectics."

In China today, capitalism is triumphant and the philosophical gains of the 1960s have been reversed. Textbooks now claim that the sides of a contradiction can merge together, or that they can co-exist without destroying each other. One text claims that "although there is significant competition among the economies of different countries, the present economic

process of globalization should jointly develop on the basis of equality, in a mutually beneficial way.” In other words, China can create an empire without challenging other empires—a myth that serves the interests of China’s new bosses.

Rejecting this nonsense, our communist movement can learn from and spread widely the true dialectics that China’s past revolutionaries helped develop and fought for.