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矛盾

Contradiction

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In contradistinction to Marx, who often appeared to use the concepts of ‘contradiction’ and ‘antagonism’ interchangeably, Lenin instead at times attempted to systematically distinguish between the two, suggesting that under a socialist society it would be possible to maintain non-antagonistic contradictions.¹ This notion of non-antagonistic contradictions was subsequently theorised not only by Stalin but also by Mao Zedong, beginning as early as the 1930s and continuing after the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). First, in August 1937, a month after his seminal speech ‘On Practice’ (*shijian lun*), Mao Zedong delivered a second lecture titled ‘On Contradiction’ (*maodun lun*), which marked his first extended engagement with the topic that Slavoj Žižek suggests is ‘arguably Mao’s central contribution to Marxist Philosophy.’² Both speeches were initially prepared for the Anti-Japanese Military and Political College in Yan’an for the purpose of promoting correct Marxist thinking and opposing ‘dogmatism.’ Although transcripts of the speeches themselves do not exist, a formal version of each work was subsequently published in the early 1950s and the two texts have come to be regarded as paradigmatic illustrations of Mao’s status as a Marxist theoretician. In particular, ‘On Contradiction’ grapples with a question that would subsequently prove to be one of the biggest challenges for the Chinese communist regime itself—namely, how to handle internal dissent within a socialist society.

Universal vs Particular

The published version of ‘On Contradiction’ opens by citing Lenin’s distinction between a metaphysical and a dialectical worldview. Mao explains that whereas a metaphysical worldview treats things as unitary, isolated, and static, a dialectical one instead views things as being in dynamic interaction with each other while also being characterised by internal contradictions. Under a dialectical perspective, moreover,

progress is achieved through a reconciliation of external and internal contradictions (through a Hegelian dialectic), which generates new ‘things’ and a new set of external and internal contradictions.

In ‘On Contradiction,’ Mao is specifically interested in the differences between what he calls the ‘universality’ and ‘particularity’ of contradiction, noting that while the former is widely recognised and has been extensively studied, the latter ‘is still not clearly understood by many comrades.’ He first outlines the notion of the universality of contradiction, and particularly the contention that all development is predicated on ‘a movement of opposites,’ but emphasises that ‘each form of matter’ is shaped by its own specific contradictions. It is precisely in Mao’s focus on these latter particularities that we find his attempts to apply the generalised logic of dialectical materialism—as developed by Hegel, Marx, Lenin, and others (see Pang’s essay in the present volume)—to the specificities of twentieth-century China’s sociopolitical situation. In particular, Mao notes that what he calls China’s ‘bourgeois-democratic revolution’ has passed through several distinct stages over the two or three decades preceding his speech—including the 1911 Revolution, the regime of the Beiyang Warlords, the First United Front, the Revolution of 1924–27, the Second United Front, and the War against Japanese Aggression—and argues that each of these stages was marked by its own specific internal contradictions that need to be analysed on their own terms.

Although Mao initially delivered the original oral version of ‘On Contradiction’ at a time when he and his fellow communists were surrounded by enemy forces ranging from the Nationalists (with whom they had been engaged in a civil conflict) to the Japanese (who were attempting to invade China), by the time the piece was finally published in the first volume of his *Selected Works* in April 1952, the Japanese and the Nationalists had already been defeated and the PRC had just been founded. In this context, the essay’s focus on internal contradictions rather than external enemies reflected the need to shift from carrying out the revolution itself, to maintaining a sense of revolutionary purpose under a socialist system. The underlying question, in other words, involves how to negotiate the transition from ‘revolution’ (*geming*) to ‘continuous revolution’ (*jixu geming*)—or, what would later come to be known as ‘continuing the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat.’ Although it was not until the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 that Mao first called for a continuous revolution—a concept closely related to, yet distinct from, the notion of a permanent revolution, as initially developed by Marx and popularised by Trotsky (see Galway’s essay in the present volume)—this sentiment of wanting to maintain a revolutionary energy even after the Communist Party had seized power could be traced back to the early years of the PRC.³

Two Sets of Contradictions

On 27 February 1957—five years after the publication of ‘On Contradiction’ and almost 20 years after the initial oral version of that work—Mao delivered another speech titled ‘On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People,’ which noted that:

Never before has our country been as united as it is today. The victories of the bourgeois-democratic revolution and of the socialist revolution and our achievements in socialist construction have rapidly changed the face of the old China. A still brighter future lies ahead for our motherland.

For Mao, however, the fact that China was now unified did not mean that contradiction was no longer relevant. Instead, he distinguished between what he characterised as ‘contradictions *between* ourselves and the enemy’ (*diwo maodun*), on one hand, and ‘contradictions *among* the people’ (*renmin neibu maodun*), on the other (emphases added), specifying that in this instance he was primarily concerned with the latter. He further explained that, in contrast to contradictions between the self and the enemy, which must be resolved by drawing a distinction between the two, contradictions *among* the people may be resolved by drawing a distinction ‘between right and wrong.’

Even as it attempted to explain how to handle the contradictions that might exist within a socialist society, ‘On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People’ simultaneously pivoted around a crucial conceptual contradiction of its own. On the one hand, Mao listed various types of contradictory relationships that he claimed one might find ‘among the people’—including contradictions between individuals whose thinking is characterised by right and left ‘deviations,’ between those who are active supporters of the new cooperatives and those who are dissatisfied with them, between the working class and the former bourgeoisie, between the interests of intellectuals from the old society and the current needs of the new society, and so forth—and he suggested that in every instance one should strive to ‘resolve’ (*jiejue*) these internal contradictions, which is to say to eradicate them. On the other hand, however, near the end of the piece he offered his now-famous discussion of the need to ‘let a hundred flowers blossom, [and] let a hundred schools of thought contend,’ stressing the importance of creating an environment in which different perspectives could productively coexist. In contrast to the preceding advocacy of the need to eliminate contradictions, this latter section instead recommended that ‘contradictions’ taking the form of critiques of government policies and limited strikes be permitted, and even encouraged.

In fact, in this piece Mao asked whether Marxism itself could be criticised, given that it was already ‘accepted as the guiding ideology by the majority of the people in our country.’ He answered his own question in the affirmative:

Certainly it can. Marxism is scientific truth and fears no criticism. If it did, and if it could be overthrown by criticism, it would be worthless. In fact, aren’t the idealists criticising Marxism every day and in every way? And those who harbour bourgeois and petty-bourgeois ideas and do not wish to change—aren’t they also criticising Marxism in every way? Marxists should not be afraid of criticism from any quarter. Quite the contrary, they need to temper and develop themselves and win new positions in the teeth of criticism and in the storm and stress of struggle. Fighting against wrong ideas is like being vaccinated—a man develops greater immunity from disease as a result of vaccination. Plants raised in hothouses are unlikely to be hardy. Carrying

out the policy of letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend will not weaken, but strengthen, the leading position of Marxism in the ideological field.

Mao then noted that when ‘unmistakable counterrevolutionaries and saboteurs of the socialist cause’ expressed ‘non-Marxist’ ideas, the solution was often ‘simply [to] deprive them of their freedom of speech.’ However, when he asked whether it would be productive or beneficial to attempt to similarly ban ‘incorrect ideas among the people,’ he answered his own question in the negative:

Certainly not. It is not only futile but very harmful to use crude methods in dealing with ideological questions among the people, with questions about man’s mental world. You may ban the expression of wrong ideas, but the ideas will still be there. On the other hand, if correct ideas are pampered in hothouses and never exposed to the elements and immunised against disease, they will not win out against erroneous ones. Therefore, it is only by employing the method of discussion, criticism, and reasoning that we can really foster correct ideas and overcome wrong ones, and that we can really settle issues.

This emphasis on the value of discussion and of the energetic exchange of ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ ideas, in turn, articulated the central premise of the Hundred Flowers Campaign, in which the Chinese people were encouraged—and often were even explicitly required—to publicly voice critiques of government policies.

Deriving out of some recommendations that had been made by Zhou Enlai in early 1956, the Hundred Flowers Campaign was a bold gesture for China’s nascent communist regime. Although Mao had obviously hoped that the campaign would reinforce perceptions of the strength and stability of the government and Party leadership (on the logic that only a firmly established leadership would encourage critiques of its own policies), there was nevertheless considerable internal concern about the Campaign’s destructive potential. In fact, in March 1957, the Minister of Culture—author Shen Dehong/Shen Yanbing, who is better known by his aptly chosen penname, Mao Dun, which deliberately puns on the Chinese word for ‘contradiction’—turned the Campaign’s call for critiques of government policies on its head, with an article critiquing the Hundred Flowers Campaign itself (a critique for which he was subsequently dismissed from office).

Although Mao’s ‘On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People’ speech was first delivered on 27 February 1957, shortly after the launch of the Hundred Flowers Campaign in late 1956, by the time a revised version of his speech was published in the *People’s Daily* in June 1957, Mao had already become concerned by the disruptive potential of these criticisms. He officially suspended the Campaign a month later in July. Indeed, not only was the call for dissident voices and points of view officially called off, but the Hundred Flowers Campaign was also quickly followed by its own antithesis, in the form of the Anti-rightist Campaign that actively targeted and persecuted those who had critiqued government policies when it was permitted. In this way, Mao’s attempt to

encourage an environment of ‘non-antagonistic contradiction’ became, instead, deeply antagonistic, and laid the groundwork for many of the regime’s repressive campaigns that would follow.

Moreover, it should be noted that Mao’s delivery of the original version of ‘On Contradiction’ in 1937 coincided not only with the CCP’s establishment of the Second United Front with the Nationalists, but also with China’s signing of a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union. Although the non-aggression pact was negotiated by China’s Nationalist government—which had hoped to use the pact to strengthen the nation’s strategic position in response to the threat of Japanese invasion—it also ended up having important ramifications for the PRC’s relationship to the Soviet Union in the early 1950s, when the Soviet Union was an important ally of the PRC. However, Mao’s advocacy—not only in ‘On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People’ but also in some earlier articles dating back to late 1956—of direct criticism of the Party and the government was in direct contradiction with current Soviet policy, and was one of the factors that contributed to the subsequent Sino-Soviet split that unfolded during the late 1950s and 1960s. The Sino-Soviet split, in turn, was emblematic of a central contradiction within Maoism itself, in that even though Maoism explicitly drew on a line of theorisation that extended from Marx and Engels to Lenin and Stalin, the Chinese state nevertheless increasingly diverged, in political terms, from the model of the Soviet Union.

New Contradictions

Even after Mao Zedong’s death in 1976, and the subsequent shift to a partially capitalist economic model with the launch of economic reforms in the late 1970s, the issue of contradictions has remained as relevant to contemporary China as ever. One author who has been particularly interested in examining and interrogating these contradictions is Yan Lianke. His 2004 novel *Lenin’s Kisses*, for instance, revolves around a harebrained plot by a local Chinese official to purchase Lenin’s preserved corpse from Russia, and install it in a newly built Lenin mausoleum in the official’s home county in central China.⁴ The work’s premise is that the Chinese bureaucrat has read that the Russian government is in dire financial straits and can no longer afford to maintain the corpse in its current position in Moscow’s Red Square. He therefore comes up with the idea of bringing it to China and using it as a tourist attraction to raise money for the residents of his county. Through this fictional plotline revolving around an attempt to install a Lenin mausoleum in central China modelled on the Mao Mausoleum in Beijing, Yan’s novel comments on the apparent contradictions not only between contemporary Maoism and a Marxist lineage leading back through Lenin to Marx himself, but also between the original Maoist regime and the trajectory that the PRC has taken in the post-Maoist era.

In addition to the fictional purchase of Lenin’s remains in *Lenin’s Kisses* (for which Yan Lianke lost his position, which he had held for years, as a professional author under the employment of the Chinese army), Yan’s novels have explored topics ranging from China’s rural AIDS epidemic to the Anti-rightist Campaign, the Great Leap Forward, and subsequent Great Famine in the late 1950s. The work that engages most explicitly with Mao Zedong’s notion of contradiction, however, is his 2001 novel *Hard*

like Water.⁵ Set during the Cultural Revolution and revolving around an adulterous affair between a soldier in the People's Liberation Army, Gao Aijun, and the daughter of a local bureaucrat, Xia Hongmei, *Hard like Water* explores the intersections between revolutionary and libidinal passion. The novel incorporates an abundant amount of Marxist and Maoist discourse, ironically redeploing it to comment on the hyperrevolutionary affair of the protagonists. One work from which the novel quotes extensively is Mao Zedong's 'On Contradiction,' and at a critical moment in the plot, just as Xia Hongmei's husband catches her and Gao Aijun *in flagrante delicto*, the narrator remarks:

Just as this extraordinary event was unfolding, a subtle contradiction developed out of this special condition. While the old contradiction had been resolved, a new contradiction emerged, as the earlier secondary contradiction was transformed into a primary contradiction.

Although this dialectical process of generating new contradictions through the resolution of earlier ones has a very specific meaning in the novel, it nevertheless aptly describes the general trajectory of modern China.

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