

Musings on Dialectics – 1

[This is a letter I wrote to friends on Sept. 25, 2010. –S.H.]

Hi everybody,

[Topics in this letter: Intro. to the discussion of dialectics; Mao’s supposed dismissal of the “negation of the negation”; dialectical laws; scientific law(s); “the law of variable speeds of development”; and a suggestion about when talking about the “negation of the negation” might be helpful.]

The issue of dialectics has popped up again, as it is bound to do from time to time in Marxist circles. (See for example, [Mike Ely’s recent article](#) on the Kasama site, and the many short comments it has occasioned.) And, as is almost always the case, it is mostly being discussed by those who have not really done any deep investigation of the topic, nor given it any long-term serious consideration.

Of course this is not really the ideal way to go about it! If anything should be carefully investigated and thought about before coming to major conclusions it is dialectics, whose key features (along with materialism) are properly considered to be (in the opinion of Engels and also myself) those most general and profound principles summed up from all the sciences, including not only Marxist historical materialism but also the physical sciences.

I wish I could say that my musings here are qualitatively different than this. But alas, I too haven’t done the truly deep investigation I should have, nor have I thought about the topic to the degree I wish I would have. But I have done *some* investigation, am doing some *more* now, and have thought (on and off) about some of the issues involved over more than 40 years. So I guess I have as much right to weigh in here as most of the participants.

Though the *best* way to proceed in science (*and* in scientific philosophy) is to undertake long and careful investigations, and give matters long and careful thought, science is not really always done this way. And, indeed, there is an alternative method—the more superficial variety of the *social method* of science. Ultimately science is always social, and it is not so much individuals who advance it as it is the society of scientists working collectively. But this becomes especially important when many of those involved are not doing deep investigations and giving things deep thought themselves.

In other words, even dilettantes can sometimes make small contributions, and even a discussion among dilettantes can sometimes be worthwhile! (Science got started that way!)

One of the most important ways to proceed in scientific philosophy is *to slow the fuck down!* This means not rushing through things, but taking your time; thinking over what you’ve just said, trying to see if you yourself really know what you’re talking about; thinking about what tacit assumptions you may have been making; thinking carefully about the terms you are using and whether they are clearly defined, and about whether all those in the discussion are using the terminology in the same way; and so forth.

When I was in a graduate philosophy seminar on aesthetics at the University of Wisconsin some eons ago, the professor said on the first day something along these lines:

“I see some familiar faces here from some of my undergraduate lectures. Do you know what the difference is going to be in this seminar as compared to those lectures? We are *not* going to cover more material! On the contrary, we will be covering much *less* material, because we will really be proceeding very slowly and carefully.”

Careful thought goes more slowly.

Mao’s supposed rejection of the “negation of the negation”

In an informal conversation with other CCP leaders in 1964 Mao was asked to say something about “the problem of the three categories”. He replied:

Engels talked about the three categories, but as for me I don’t believe in two of those categories. (The unity of opposites is the most basic law, the transformation of quality and quantity into one another is the unity of the opposites quality and quantity, and the negation of the negation does not exist at all.) The juxtaposition, on the same level, of the transformation of quality and quantity into one another, the negation of the negation, and the law of the unity of opposites is ‘triplism’, not monism. The most basic thing is the unity of opposites. The transformation of quality and quantity into one another is the unity of the opposites quality and quantity. There is no such thing as the negation of the negation. Affirmation, negation, affirmation, negation . . . in the development of things, every link in the chain of events is both affirmation and negation. Slave-holding society negated primitive society, but with reference to feudal society it constituted, in turn, the affirmation. Feudal society constituted the negation in relation to slave-holding society but it was in turn the affirmation with reference to capitalist society. Capitalist society was the negation in relation to feudal society, but it is, in turn, the affirmation in relation to socialist society.

In keeping with my own admonition to “go slow”, I am not going to attempt a full analysis of this passage yet. (Maybe I’ll get to that in a later letter.) But to start with here I’ll first raise some questions to ponder. (I have my own ideas about the answers, but I’ll mostly not give them yet.):

1. Are these “laws of dialectics” appropriately even called “categories”? (What is a “category” in Marxist philosophy?!)
2. Is it precisely clear what Mao means here by the concept of the “negation of the negation”?
3. Indeed, is it precisely clear what Engels (or Marx or even Hegel!) meant by that term? (I mean precisely clear to *us*.)

4. Is it precisely clear even what the term “negation” means in Marxist philosophy? (Let alone “the negation of the negation”.)
 5. Are those who already have strong opinions about whether Mao rejected, or was right to reject, the concept of the “negation of the negation” themselves prepared to give precise definitions of these various terms? (If not, are they sure they know what they are talking about?!)
 6. Might there be more than one interpretation of what the term “negation of the negation” means, even within Marxist philosophy?
 7. Might Engels and Mao have meant something a bit different by the term?
 8. Is it clear what Mao means by “affirmation, negation, affirmation, negation...”??
 9. Could it be that what Mao means by that phrase is really pretty much what Engels meant by the “negation of the negation”? (This is what Nick Knight argues in his introduction to *Mao Zedong on Dialectical Materialism*.)
 10. How many laws of dialectics are there? Only one? Wouldn't it be a bit strange for a subject as complex as dialectics if this were the case?
 11. Even if the law of the unity of opposites in all things is the *basic* dialectical law, and everything can ultimately be analyzed in those terms, couldn't there still be subsidiary dialectical laws that are well-worth formulating? (Isn't it good to understand that dialectical development occurs through qualitative leaps for example?)
 12. Could it be that taking every word or phrase from Mao (just as with Engels!) as the absolute and complete truth is the wrong way to proceed here? (And perhaps a religious approach to MLM?)
- I'll be coming back to at least some of these questions and issues later (most maybe in later letters). For now I'm just setting the stage.

The “unity of opposites” as the primary law of dialectics

Both Lenin and Mao said so, and I agree. But is even this law really clear to every Marxist? (Obviously not!)

If you ask many Marxists to give you examples of dialectical contradictions *other than* those in human society (such as between the bourgeoisie and proletariat), you will often be disappointed to find that they are hard pressed to do so, or—if they do give examples—they will often be rather weak or misleading examples. Such as hot & cold, plus & minus, big & small, and conceptual opposites of that sort. (Even Engels is somewhat guilty of doing this, though he also gives other, better examples.)

I'm not going to get into the explication of the law of the "unity of opposites" very deeply yet either! But let me hazard this statement at least: the best, most suggestive, and least misleading examples of dialectical contradictions in any sphere are those which are related to *processes*. Thus a *good* example of dialectical contradiction and the unity of opposites in nature is the contradiction between the forces of tectonic plates which push together to raise mountains, and the forces of wind, rain, ice and gravity which serve to wear down mountains. For a while the mountain-raising forces may dominate, but in the end (for any given mountain range) the forces of erosion will win out.

What does it mean to say that there is a *unity* between the opposites in a dialectical contradiction? Again, I'm not going to give an immediate answer beyond saying that the two opposing forces are part of the overall process (i.e. serve to define it). In the example I gave, these two opposing but united forces explain the birth, life and death of mountain ranges.

But can you see how there is a tremendous amount here that is packed into Mao's conception of the "unity of opposites"? And there is a whole lot more, such as the notion of the interpenetration of opposites, concepts of dominant aspects or poles, of antagonism or non-antagonism, of dialectical resolution, and on and on.

Yes, dialectics can be summed up as the recognition of contradiction in all things, or as the unity of opposites in things, and so forth. But these are far from simple ideas when you get right down to it.

Dialectics is not a simple matter, and it does need to be studied, and illustrated with numerous examples from all spheres of life, including both human society and natural science. There are many technical terms and concepts one needs to learn and comprehend, before one can even talk about dialectics intelligently.

And because dialectics sums up so much of our scientific knowledge and experience in general, it seems to me misleading (at best) to say that it has only one law to it. Yes, as Lenin and Mao said, there is one *basic* law. But that one law will be pretty much meaningless to people who have not yet understood many of the subsidiary laws of dialectics.

To comprehend a complex area of science one needs to understand not just the most fundamental law in that area (though that is most essential), but a wide variety of additional subsidiary laws.

How many laws are there in chemistry?

In a way, that's a silly question! There are probably at least tens of thousands of scientific laws in chemistry, some of broad scope, and many of very narrow scope (such as the precise laws describing the properties of the fluorine negative ion). In a sense, what we even call a "law" in chemistry (or what we instead call a "property", "theory", etc.) is rather arbitrary.

On the other hand, one could easily argue that there is only *one* law in chemistry, which is otherwise known as the theory of quantum electrodynamics. QED is the "[central organizing theory](#)" of chemistry, or

in other words its basic law. All the specific and narrower laws in chemistry, at least according to current knowledge, arise from or can be deduced from QED.

Nevertheless, could we say that someone really understood chemistry who only knew the mathematical formulation of QED? Wouldn't it also be helpful to have heard about the various elements, the Periodic Table, and to know a few things such as that water is made out of two atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen?!

Well, I'm being ridiculous of course. But the point here is that you cannot really understand any sphere of science if all you know about it is one law. And that is true even if that one law is the most basic law in that area. Furthermore, you will not really be able to understand even that one central law unless you have at least some grasp of the most important subsidiary laws that flow from it.

And this is just as true in dialectics as it is in any of the specific sciences.

A law of dialectics you may never have heard of!

Just as with chemistry, biology, or any specific science, there are indefinitely many laws or principles of dialectics (though likely not all that many of them that we might find of any use to make special note of).

I already mentioned one important subsidiary law that Mao didn't list in the passage above, namely the law that dialectical development occurs through qualitative leaps. Mao did mention the law of the transformation of quantity into quality, which is closely related but not quite the same thing.

But just to demonstrate that there are indefinitely many subsidiary laws of dialectics, I will now outline one which you will probably have never heard of referred to as a law, but which you will likely be quite familiar with. For lack of another name, I'll call it "the law of variable speeds of development".

Change and development seldom proceed at a uniform pace. Instead there are periods of relatively slow development interspersed with periods of relatively rapid development.

Why is this the case? It is simply because any complex process—while it can be viewed *overall* as a matter of the working out of a single overall dialectical contradiction—will ordinarily work itself out through the medium of many distinct subsidiary contradictions. Each of these subsidiary contradictions will have its own characteristics, its own two opposing aspects, and its own rate of working toward its resolution (which may in turn be modified at times by yet further subsidiary contradictions). In short, each subsidiary contradiction works itself out in its own way and at its own speed. [Cf. the *particularity of contradiction*—yet another dialectical law, and one that was dear to Mao's heart.] Thus some of the subsidiary contradictions resolve themselves faster than others, and some of the faster ones depend first on the completion of the some of the slower ones. Therefore the overall process, governed by the overall contradiction, resolves itself in a manner that looks from a distance like one of "fits and starts".

As far as I know, this particular subsidiary law of dialectics, the law of variable speeds of development,

has never been explicitly listed before, though certainly it has been informally understood. Is it useful or worthwhile to explicitly mention it in a thorough explication of dialectics? I'll leave that up to you to decide, but it seems to me that it might be at least useful to mention in passing.

But again, my point is that there are a lot of things in dialectics like this!

An example of when it is useful to talk about the “negation of the negation”

This is getting to be quite a long letter, so I'll start to wrap it up (even though dialectics is such a big topic that there is always more to say about it).

In my own view of talking about even “[negation](#)”, let alone the “negation of the negation”, is that it is usually not a good idea when talking to people about dialectical contradictions. These are words that tend to confuse people, and hence can be counterproductive. Moreover, most often terms like this (as well as more obscure terms such as “[sublation](#)”) are used not to help people understand things, but by those who wish to show off and/or intimidate others.

However, there are circumstances where some additional terminology is useful in discussing contradictions, and in particular where we are talking about *complexes of related contradictions* where things can tend to be confusing. Generally in these circumstances there is one overall contradiction and a series of sequential or connected subsidiary contradictions.

The clearest and best example of this, for us Marxists, is the development of what I'll call the overall *exploitation contradiction* in history. There was a time (before around 10,000 BCE [“B.C.”]) when the class exploitation of the labor of one human being by another was essentially impossible, because humans were not capable of reliably generating enough surplus through their labor to support any exploiters. With the advent of agriculture, and the ability to store grain for lean periods, exploitation did become possible. As I wrote elsewhere, in explicating the term “[sublation](#)”:

In a multi-stage process (involving a series of sub-contradictions) each of the intermediate stages is *sublated* by a later or superior stage, which accounts for both the change in and the continuity of the process as a whole. One concrete example, in historical materialism, is the development of the *exploitation contradiction* in human history. The first stage in the overall development of this contradiction was slavery, which involved the sub-contradiction between slaves and slaveowners and the exploitation of the slaves by the slaveowners. This was eventually transformed (or “sublated”) into the stage of feudalism, which was characterized by the *new* sub-contradiction between serfs (or peasants) and feudal landlords, but with still the exploitation of the former by the latter. Feudalism in turn was later transformed or sublated into capitalism, where another *new* sub-contradiction arose, this time between the workers and the capitalists, but still with the same exploitation of one social class by another class. Note that the term “sublation” is by no means necessary in describing this overall process; in fact, if the goal is to clearly explain (rather than to intimidate with esoteric language), the ordinary word “transformation” seems far preferable here! Note also that the abolition of capitalism and the establishment of socialism (and then communism) will not involve the further sublation (or transformation) of the overall exploitation contradiction, but rather its complete abolition. Society as a whole will be much more

profoundly transformed, but economic exploitation itself will be *eliminated* and not just transformed.

Although I speak of “sublation” there, this discussion could have just as well (perhaps, better!) been framed in terms of the negation of the negation. In other words, I think the phrase “the [negation of the negation](#)” is really only appropriate when talking about chains of sub-contradictions within an overall contradiction, where we wish to refer to *both* the change and continuity of contradictions. And even in these cases the *term* “negation of the negation” (just like “sublation”) can be dispensed with if one chooses to do so.

But if one does once come to understand the term, it may later be useful as shorthand for describing and coming to understand some similar sort of dialectical situation. The real issue, then, is whether or not the *term* “negation of the negation” is useful and helpful or not.

Note that in the quote from Mao which I included earlier he used the same example to argue *against* the term “negation of the negation”. I would simply say that there are different ways of talking about complex things like this, and there are both virtues and difficulties in Mao’s way as well as in Engels’s way. But in this case I think I prefer Engels’s way.

Scott