

## Comments on A. Montano's Letter on Dialectics

My initial reaction to A. Montano's detailed critique of Mao's and Bob Avakian's understanding of "the negation of the negation" in Marxist dialectics was to wonder: How important is this question? Don't we have more pressing issues to address, many of which are noted in DC's accompanying letter?

At the same time, another voice was telling me: "You're pretty rusty in this area." I last read On Contradiction at least ten years ago, and I probably have never read much of the Marx, Engels and Lenin referred to in Montano's letter. Most of us spend more time reading movie reviews than studying Marx, Lenin and Mao on philosophy. (Paying attention to movies and other areas of culture is, of course, important in its own right.)

We have jobs, ongoing political work, families and friends--but we must also have revolutionary theory. Montano correctly points out that this neglect of theory (which includes Marxist philosophy) is a long-standing form of pragmatism in the communist movement in the U.S.

A second reading of Montano's letter enabled me to follow his argument more clearly, and to understand why he mainly used examples from the natural sciences to illustrate his points about the dialectical method. It also helped me to reread On Contradiction (1937), Mao's 1964 "Talk on Questions of Philosophy," Lenin's short essay "On Dialectics" (1915), and the sections on philosophy in Mao's Immortal Contributions (1979) and The Science of Revolution (1983). A more thorough reading of Marx, Engels and Lenin are next on my agenda.

### **(1) Areas of Agreement**

(a) Based on what I've read to date, I agree with A. Montano's critique of Mao's treatment of "the negation of the negation" and the closely related concepts of sublation and synthesis. I also agree with Montano's criticism of the efforts of Bob Avakian and the RCP to defend Mao's errors on this question.

On Contradiction represented an important defense and development of dialectical materialism. Mao's main target in the mid-1930's was dogmatic and mechanical materialist thinking in the Party (championed by Wang Ming, Li-Lisan et.al., and by the Comintern).

Mao correctly stressed that contradiction is the "kernel" of dialectical materialism. This was the key concept to grasp to decisively break with viewing Marxism-Leninism as pre-set formulae. This mechanistic method led to disastrous swings to the right and "left" for the CCP and revolutionary movement in China over the previous decade.

Nevertheless, it is interesting that Mao does not refer to Marx and Lenin's writings on "the negation of the negation" in O.C. While Mao seems to have viewed "contradiction" as the fundamental concept in dialectics, his later writings suggest that he may have understood the "negation of the negation" in mechanical, or even cyclical, terms--with the thesis reappearing in the synthesis in more or less original form.

In "Talk on Questions of Philosophy" (1964), Mao asserted that "there is no such thing as the negation of the negation." (Reprinted in Chairman Mao Talks to the People, edited by S. Schram, p. 226) Earlier in this talk, Mao states that "it is a good thing to collect materials...on the law of the unity of opposites [including] what Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin say about it... (p. 217)

However, this major pronouncement on Marxist dialectics is not explained at all. And Mao does not refer to the writings of Marx and Lenin on this subject, and explain why they are incorrect. Instead Mao counterposes the concept of "affirmation and negation."

In this talk, Mao pays more attention to the question of synthesis. (pp. 221-225) This was primarily aimed at the concept of "two combining into one," which revisionists in the CCP were advancing to deny the continuing existence of class struggle in society and within the Party in the early 1960s. Mao's discussion of synthesis mainly uses military analogies. He explains how the Red Armies swallowed up, or synthesized, the KMT armies in the late 1940s.

Here, Mao does not use synthesis in a scientific manner, in which the thesis is sublated and reappears in a new form in the synthesis. Chiang Kai-shek's armies (thesis) may have been "swallowed up" by the Red Armies (antithesis), but the captured Nationalist officers and soldiers who joined the larger, victorious Communist-led forces (synthesis) brought their political training and class prejudices along with them. This dialectical process set up new contradictions within the Red Armies and the CCP.

In fact, Mao's pathbreaking understanding of the continuation of the class struggle under socialism, with the bourgeoisie headquartered in the Party, is a powerful application of the dialectical method, including sublation and the negation of the negation.

In a country like China, the proletariat does not simply "swallow up" the bourgeoisie through various stages of collectivization of the land and socialization of industry. Through the process of intense class struggle, the bourgeoisie (thesis) is sublated by the proletariat (antithesis). The bourgeoisie continues to exist in new forms. Most importantly, the bourgeoisie continually arises out of significant remnants of capitalism in the socialist economic base and superstructure, including within the communist party and state apparatus.

Even if a country is on the "socialist road," the bourgeoisie is not simply negated by the proletariat. The contradiction is necessarily resolved by the transformation of the bourgeoisie into new forms--the negation of the negation. As Montano puts it on page 3: "Certain features of the thesis return on another level, transformed, the negation of the negation." This is an example of the process of "spiral development in the essence of things."

In Mao's Immortal Contributions, Bob does not exactly defend Mao's statement that "the negation of the negation" does not exist. Rather, he tries to demonstrate that this concept does not have universal application. Bob also suggests that an analysis using the method of thesis-antithesis-synthesis is "straight-linish." (Montano, p.17) Actually, the method that Mao suggests in his 1964 talk, affirmation-negation-affirmation, sounds more "straight-linish" to me.

In his letter, Montano demonstrates how Bob's reasoning in this area is superficial and unscientific. Bob must have been aware of Marx and Lenin's views on these questions, and most likely chose to sweep the conflict under the rug due to the political exigencies of the time, e.g., the full scale assault on Mao by the revisionists in China, and by a major section of the RCP itself, in the late 1970s.

We must "divide one into two" here. While we defend Mao against revisionist attacks, we must also conclude that Mao's denial of "the negation of the negation" and his unscientific view of synthesis are not among his immortal contributions in the realm of philosophy.

(b) Also well taken is Montano's criticism of Mao's view of the conditions and basis of change. In Q.C., Mao was principally fighting against dogmatic use the line of the Comintern as a "cookie cutter," with little analysis of China's particularities, and against related philosophical views of motion as the product of external causes. Still, Mao did not thoroughly understand how external factors can decisively affect the internal character of contradictions.

This is connected to significant tendencies of the Chinese CP, including Mao and the revolutionaries allied with him, towards nationalism and subordinating support for the advance of the proletarian revolution worldwide to the defense of a socialist country. This appeared most clearly in the variants of the "Soviet main danger" line and "three worlds theory" of the early 1970s in which the Chinese CP sought to build a strategic alliance with one imperialist bloc against the other.

Bob Avakian and the RCP have made critical contributions to the international communist movement on how to correctly view the relationship between revolutions in particular countries and the process of development of the worldwide revolutionary movement. They have correctly criticized the errors of Mao here, as well as others who have blindly followed and repeated these errors.

[With the "external conditions/internal basis" question in mind, I agree with Montano's suggestion (p. 16) that we need to re-examine the role of feudalism and semi-feudalism--and the road to revolution in some parts of the Third World--in a world increasingly penetrated and inter-connected by imperialism.]

One lesson is that the philosophical foundations of erroneous political lines (such as the 3 worlds theory) must be examined carefully. I would add that we must also attempt to understand the theoretical and political context that led even a great revolutionary communist like Mao Tse-tung to embrace an incorrect line in an important area. Beyond this, Montano's letter demonstrates that we must strive to further develop Marxist-Leninist-Maoist philosophy in order to build more reliable and higher-caliber political weapons.

This letter also made me think about why I never checked out Mao's criticism of Engels on the "negation of the negation," and why I never looked any closer at Bob's defense of Mao on this question. While some of the responsibility is mine, the RCP has not, to my knowledge, organized study around such questions. The Party talks a great deal about the importance of "grappling with revolutionary theory." In practice, this means that Party members and advanced forces are directed to grasping the Party's current political line and its current view of

MLM theory. This does not include analysing and struggling over whether that line and theory have serious errors or shortcomings.

(c) Montano makes an important observation that, in a scientific sense, the resolutions of contradictions create "spirals of development." And that these spirals do not necessarily move to "higher" levels. (p. 10) Thus, progress is conditional, not inevitable. We can say that communism is inevitable unless the earth is hit by a massive asteroid, or nuclear warfare produces nuclear winter, destroying life on earth. Spiral development may also lead to retrogression, including the defeat of revolutionary movements and the loss of socialist countries, along the long march to the triumph of communism worldwide.

## **(2) My Questions**

My main question is at the same time a task that confronts us all: How can materialist dialectics be applied to scientifically understand and transform the complex dynamics of human society? I feel far more confident identifying "laws" when they are on the micro level (where variables can be limited and more easily controlled and analysed) or at the macro level (such as "repression produces resistance" or "communism is inevitable").

Montano's letter recognizes that "the study of social laws . . . involve(s) far greater complexity than natural laws." (p. 8) He also states that a social process may undergo many "alternate pathways" of development "due to any single contradiction interacting with processes governed by other contradictions." (pp. 6, 19) (This has some similarities to Stephen Jay Gould's view of the evolution of species, including our own.)

Montano also suggests that there are "dominant pathways" in any process (p. 19, n. 12), and that "a process can be governed by fundamentally deterministic laws but yet exhibit randomness." (p. 9) This concept may be a useful approach.

In socio-historical processes, certain pathways of development may be dominant under particular conditions. To derive such (conditional) laws of social development requires, among other things, systematic analysis of social practice and data from a variety of societies and historical periods, focusing on key milestones in the class struggle (progress/retrogression) and important developments in the imperialist system on a global level. This is a daunting task, especially for any one individual or group of activists.

It is very easy to fall into agnosticism here and conclude that there are no laws of social development that can be discovered and verified. Montano's letter stresses the fact that a scientific view of the dialectical process leads to an understanding of necessity, to the inevitable resolution of contradictions in a certain direction in a natural or social process.

However, the complex, interdependent and conditional nature of social-economic-political-military-ideological processes in any one society, and in the world as a whole, raise an important question: To what degree are the process of proletarian revolution in the U.S., and the struggle for communism worldwide, governed by "fundamentally deterministic laws"? (Montano, p. 9)

As a Marxist, I know that there are laws at work in society, and that our understanding of them is incomplete (or relatively primitive) at this point in history. Still, we must determine to what extent these laws are conditional, and to what degree they are "fundamentally deterministic." This requires engaging in practice, and deeply summing up decades of practice, as well as re-examining our theoretical constructs and building new ones.

In any case, the point is to take responsibility for doing this theoretical-practical-theoretical work in order to advance our knowledge. For instance, how do we analyse the Party's position (treated as a "law") in the late 70s and the 80s that the U.S. and Soviet-led blocs would necessarily unleash World War III unless revolution in one or more major imperialist countries prevented it? Or the "law" advanced in America in Decline (1984) that imperialist development takes place in "spirals," with major inter-imperialist wars as nodal points that both destroy and reorganize capital. What has it meant to continually assert, from the early 1970s to the present, that "the crisis of imperialism is deepening"?

I agree that we must strive to uncover and understand objective laws of development in order to scientifically guide our practice. However, the recurring ability of international communist movement, including the RCP in the above examples, to find "necessity" where it does not exist, makes me somewhat cautious in this area.

### (3) Minor Disagreements

(a) If Montano believes that the Party's errors on dialectics are just one indication of general agnosticism in the Party's line, I disagree with him. As explained above, I think that Bob's defense of Mao's errors in this area had more to do with the political context in 1978, and with the RCP's "defend and uphold" reaction when it comes to questioning Mao (or the Party), than with general agnosticism.

Certainly, the Party's line on war and revolution in the 1980s did not suffer from agnosticism. On the other hand, many years after the crumbling of the Soviet bloc, this incorrect line has still not been summed up, much less replaced with a more correct understanding. This deafening silence has undoubtedly fed agnosticism and theoretical confusion in the Party, and among many other Maoists and revolutionaries worldwide.

(b) Montano states that Mao's denial of the negation of the negation is the "deepest form" of agnosticism. (pp. 37-38) It operates at the most basic level of the dialectical method, and can only produce more mayhem at more complex levels of analysis. However, I don't see it as the "final" or "last hiding place" of agnosticism, pragmatism and metaphysics.

Even if we get a strong grasp on the basic method of dialectics, much difficult work remains. We still must identify the important contradictions, determine which are principal at any given time, and analyse how they affect each other. We must always pay attention to how objective and subjective factors change and affect each other. Throughout this process, agnosticism, pragmatism and metaphysics, in an endless variety of new forms, will rear their ugly heads in our thinking and practice.

With comradely greetings,

CFB