

The Fundamental & Principal Contradictions in the World Today

(Rough Notes—This is all off the top of my head. In writing this up I have not had time to go back and review what Lenin, Mao, the RCP and others have to say relevant to the issue.)

What are the fundamental and principal contradictions in the world today?

The *fundamental contradiction* is the contradiction that lies at the heart of a process of development, which overall explains it, and which overall determines what happens. The *principal contradiction* is a contradiction which may or may not be the fundamental contradiction (i.e., the most basic), but which—for a time, anyway—serves to move things forward; i.e., the contradiction which is *driving* the process forward *at the moment*.

(Contradictions often work themselves out through subsidiary or secondary contradictions. In fact, you could plausibly argue that they *always do!* But only *sometimes* do we focus on one these subsidiary contradictions and label it as principal for a time. The precise conditions under which we do this are complex. It depends on many things, including how detailed we want our analysis to be at the given moment.)

There are lots of contradictions in the world, in the natural world and in society. But generally when we refer to the fundamental and principal contradictions in the world *in a political context*, we mean the fundamental *political* contradiction, and the principal *political* contradiction. That is, we are talking about the world of social struggles and politics.

In the 19th century, Marx determined that the fundamental contradiction in capitalist society is the contradiction between social production and private appropriation. But he also said that the fundamental contradiction in society is between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. How can both these things be true? They can both be true, because they are at different levels of analysis. The first statement is about capitalism as an economic system; the second is about capitalist society considered as a realm of political struggle.

Of the two statements, the most basic (or the most *fundamental* of the two fundamental contradictions if you wish!) is the economic one. Why? Because of one of the central principles of historical materialism, that ideology and ideological struggles, and hence political struggles, are based most essentially on material interests, and people's differing relationships to the means of production, i.e., on economics. But while saying that the fundamental contradiction in society is between social production and private expropriation is more basic and at a lower level of analysis, often we do need to discuss things at the higher level, at the level of politics. That is why Marx sometimes speaks of the economic contradiction, and at other times of the political contradiction.

In the 19th century, that is pretty much as far as things went on this issue. Marx and Engels spoke not in terms of the fundamental (or principal) contradiction *in the world*, but of the fundamental contradiction *in capitalist society*. Partly this was due to a certain Eurocentrism that infected even Marxism to a degree; but mostly it was due to the fact that imperialism had not yet developed as a separate stage of capitalism, and thus that *inter-imperialist* political struggles, and *anti-imperialist* struggles of the peoples of the world, had not yet developed in the major way that they have done in the 20th century.

Imperialism developed as a new stage of capitalism in the closing decades of the 19th century, but for a while, the principal contradiction in the world remained the same as the fundamental contradiction: the contradiction between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat within the imperialist and other capitalist countries. The qualitative change came with the outbreak of World War I. The fundamental contradiction remained the same—as it always will under capitalism—but the *principal* contradiction suddenly changed completely. The new principal contradiction was the inter-imperialist contradiction between the two imperialist blocks, which had thrown much of the world into war.

Sure there was this horrible world war, you might say, but why should we claim that this changed the principal contradiction in the world? I will point out first that Marxists have always followed Clausewitz in maintaining that war is the continuation of politics by other means, and that war itself is in a perfectly real way *concentrated politics*—in this case, concentrated inter-imperialist politics. Moreover, the war affected all the *other* previous kinds of politics in the world, besides inter-imperialist politics. In the belligerent countries, there were initial waves of patriotism; the struggles for socialism were severely impacted—even crippled—and the bourgeoisie was able to use the war situation to attack and suppress the revolutionary movement everywhere. Then, *in some countries*, notably Russia (but also Germany, Hungary and other European countries), as the war dragged on and the people grew to hate it and its proponents, it began to have the opposite effect. Instead of being the factor that drove down the revolutionary struggle, it became the factor that gave ever more insistent impulse to revolution. Although there were certainly other factors involved (including the existence of Lenin and the Bolsheviks), it is quite true to say that without World War I the Russian Revolution would not have taken place when it did.

In short, World War I did create a new situation, did reflect a new principal contradiction that drove the world of politics and social struggles forward in a completely different way. It is because of such clear cases as this that Marxists have abstracted the concept of the “principal contradiction” and have learned the importance of trying to determine what the principal contradiction is as a means to guiding our political work.

At the end of World War I, for awhile there were still lingering political effects of the war. But there was also a major new factor thrown into the political equation, the successful proletarian revolution in Russia. This led to a new contradiction, between the new proletarian state and international imperialism, which invaded Russia and tried to suppress the revolution. At the same time, the fundamental political contradiction reasserted itself around the world, and especially in Europe, with renewed intensity. New communist parties came into being, and the class struggle really intensified.

So what was the principal contradiction in the world in the immediate post-World War I period? Although there is some temptation to say that it was the contradiction between the new proletarian state and the imperialist powers—on the grounds that a lot depended on the outcome of that struggle—, in my opinion the contradiction that was really most affecting revolutionary politics and driving it forward in most countries at that time, was once again the fundamental contradiction (between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in each country).

I think the principal contradiction in the world remained the same as the fundamental contradiction during the entire inter-war period, even though the contradiction between the imperialist powers and the oppressed peoples of the world became steadily more important—especially in China.

The outbreak of World War II changed things again. The principal contradiction in the world became an inter-imperialist one, between the “allies” and the “axis” imperialist blocks. Once again this affected all other political struggles, it drove political developments and struggles in new ways. When Germany attacked the Soviet Union, the character of World War II changed *to some extent*, but not completely. It was a combination of an inter-imperialist war, and a war between (one) imperialism and a socialist country. This was a new contradiction, and an important one. But which contradiction was principal?

Stalin and just about all the CP’s around the world said that with the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union, the principal contradiction in the world became that between imperialism and socialism. But although that struggle was a critical one which truly affected the future of the world, was it really this contradiction that was driving things forward on a world basis *at that time*? I think in most areas it was still the inter-imperialist contradiction that was driving things. In the USSR the principal contradiction was between German imperialism and socialism. In China the principal contradiction was between Japanese imperialism and the oppressed people of China. But for the world as a whole, the principal contradiction during all of World War II still seems to me to be between the two imperialist blocks.

After World War II we entered a new era, and the principal contradiction in the world became that between the imperialist powers on the one hand, and the people of countries oppressed by imperialism on the other hand. Wasn’t the fundamental contradiction in the world still important? Of course. But the contradiction driving the political struggle forward in the world as a whole was that between imperialism and the oppressed peoples. The most important political development in the post-war period was of course the Chinese revolution, which was as much against imperialism and feudalism as it was against the bourgeoisie. Other important people’s wars also developed during this period, with varying degrees of success. Many of these, such as Vietnam, were clearly focused against foreign imperialism. During the postwar period through the 60s, most of the colonial countries gained independence. (That is, the world switched over from colonialism to neo-colonialism—a big political change.) Most of the important political struggles in the world since the end of World War II have been between imperialism and the people that imperialism oppresses in other countries.

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In my opinion the principal contradiction in the world has not changed since the end of World War II. This was also the opinion of Mao and the CPC (despite wavering with the “three worlds theory”). It is also the explicit opinion of Chairman Gonzalo and the CP of Peru, and I think of other revolutionary parties such as the CP of the Philippines. However, it is not the opinion of the RCP (or at least it wasn’t during the 80s; it’s hard to know what their current opinion is on such theoretical matters any more since they don’t publish much in the way of revolutionary theory these days). So we need to look at their reasoning.

The RCP saw correctly that the contention between the US and the USSR was growing more intense during the 1980s, saw that the arms race and preparations for war were intensifying, and predicted (incorrectly of course) that this would soon lead to all-out nuclear war between them. Because in the modern age there is hardly anything more *important* than world war, they decided circa 1980 that the principal contradiction in the world was the inter-imperialist one between U.S. imperialism and Soviet social-imperialism.

If world war had broken out between the two imperialist superpowers then the principal contradiction would have in fact been that between them. But it didn't, and so it wasn't. It's that simple.

The principal contradiction in the world is *not* the contradiction which is most *important* from the point of view of world history, say. Nor is it a contradiction whose playing out will someday be critically important. It is defined as the contradiction which is *at the moment* most responsible for driving forward political struggles around the world. "Ultimately most important" does not necessarily mean "principal", nor vice versa!

It is in fact *conceivable* that the contradiction between the two superpowers might have developed into the principal contradiction in the world during the 80s even if it did not actually lead to world war. If for example the contradiction led to massive political action in various countries against war, if it led to political instability and even perhaps revolution somewhere, or even if it had just led to a changing of the whole political picture in a number of important countries. The RCP tried to make it into those things, and was correct in trying to do so in my opinion, even though it proved unsuccessful (and didn't have much chance of success). But despite some increased anti-war activity, the whole political picture did not change. There was *not* any new contradiction driving politics, *even if there should have been!*

You do not get to choose what the principal contradiction is! It was not the RCP's choice, nor anyone else's. The principal contradiction is an objective fact about the objective situation. We can try to change it, and actually our work is one factor that can ultimately change it. But it is not changed by simply deciding that it would make more sense if it were something else. It is not changed by simply figuring out what is the most important contradiction in the world from the point of view of the people's interests.

You can sometimes know that the principle contradiction in the world will change in the future, and even exactly what it will change to. But just knowing that is not what makes it change, nor does it make it change immediately. During the 30s, for example, most Marxists expected that there would be another inter-imperialist world war, and many of them knew that when such a war broke out the principal contradiction in the world would change. They saw the developments leading up to war and knew how important they were. But the principal contradiction itself did not change until the war actually broke out. (Again, it is *conceivable* that it might have changed before the war actually broke out; but in actual fact it didn't.)

So I say that the RCP was wrong about the principal contradiction in the world during the 1980s, and would have still been wrong even if their expectations of world war had turned out to be correct. Only when war actually broke out (or perhaps a bit earlier if the people of the world had taken the war possibility more seriously and started doing something about it), would the principal driving political contradiction in the world have changed.

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Finally, about A.M.'s view on what the principal contradiction in the world is right now (1998): I can't be sure I understood him correctly, and encourage him to write up his position—and criticize the view I have expressed here. But he seemed to be saying that the principal contradiction in the world today is the same as the fundamental contradiction. Moreover, he wants to express that in terms of socialized production vs. private appropriation, or possibly in terms of competing capitalist production blocks. Anyway, in economic terms rather than political terms. I have claimed above that this is not the level of analysis we usually want to focus on when

talking about the principal contradiction in the world at any given time. Instead, we want to put it in political terms.

But even if you do put it in political terms, I think A.M. is wrong here. We are not back to the pre-World War II era, let alone back to the pre-World War I era, where the principal contradiction was the same as the fundamental contradiction, namely between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in the various capitalist countries. Instead, as Ted and others expressed very well, the principal contradiction in the world today is still between the imperialist powers, on the one hand, and the oppressed people in the countries under the thumb of imperialism, on the other hand.

A.M. is right to investigate and think about the underlying workings of the evolving international capitalist economy as a means of determining where things are going, and as a means of figuring out what economic contradictions are driving the development of the world capitalist system. And he is right to recognize that this does ultimately determine the political contradictions we see, and even determine which one of those political contradictions is principal. I think a lot of what he is saying about the contradictions at the economic level of analysis is indeed correct. But I just think that none of that is in conflict with the view that the principal political contradiction in the world today is between imperialism and the oppressed people of the world.

If there is something about A.M.'s analysis of the economic contradictions governing the present development of international capitalism that requires the conclusion that the principal political contradiction in the world is between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat rather than the contradiction between imperialism and the oppressed peoples, then I think there must be something very wrong somewhere in his economic analysis.

—J. (8/29/98)