

CHAPTER V

THE RELATIVITY OF THE
UNITY OF OPPOSITES AND THE
ABSOLUTENESS OF THEIR
CONFLICT

IN THE FOREWORD to the first volume of *Capital* Marx wrote:

"In its rational form dialectic is a scandal and an abomination to the bourgeoisie and its doctrinaire spokesmen, because, while supplying a positive understanding of the existing state of things, it at the same time furnishes an understanding of the negation of that state of things, and enables us to recognize that that state of things will inevitably break up; it is an abomination to them because it regards every historically developed social form as in fluid movement, as transient; because it lets nothing overawe it, but is in its very nature critical and revolutionary."

Dialectic "in its rational form," materialistic dialectic, is a scandal and an abomination to the bourgeoisie because, as opposed to metaphysical views which stress the immutability of existing forms or their slow uninterrupted "evolutionary" change, it demonstrates the revolutionary change of forms, the self-negation of everything existent, in virtue of the development of internal contradictions.

But whoever reduced Marx's thought, or the Marx-Leninist doctrine of development in general, to the statement "all flows, all changes," would distort the actual

essence of the doctrine and would open the door to mechanism, relativism, teleology, and modern neo-Hegelianism. Indeed the mechanists also, as we know, are ready to admit that "all flows, all changes." But "flows and changes" in their understanding is only a quantitative process, the actual elements remaining unchanged. And the relativist not only admits that "all changes, all flows," but makes such change absolute, including within it our own knowledge. Thus every kind of stability in objective phenomena is swept away, becoming but a subjective appearance. Our knowledge is held to be limited and distorted in its very nature so that it does not even reflect truly the creative flow of reality.

The teleologically inclined bourgeois thinker also admits that "all flows, all changes." But he goes on to affirm that this flow, this change, is nothing else than the path to the realization of ever more perfect forms, the tendency towards which is deeply seated in life itself, that movement is determined by those ideal forms in which the imminent purposes of life reside.

There are other eclectic points of view, as, for instance, the theory that history shows an alternation of stable and revolutionary epochs, the first characterized by definiteness, stability and self-identity of the processes found in it, the second by indefiniteness, movement and change. Where there is definiteness there is no change; where there is movement, there is no definiteness—that is the essence of this eclectic wisdom!

Only a conception of development as a conflict of internal contradictions at all stages of development, gives a profound and adequate understanding of actuality and arms us against mechanism, relativism, eclecticism and other bourgeois revisionist "isms." This conception alone shows the unity of the aspects of a process and their relative identity not as an external form, not as a stage in a process, not as a basic characteristic of a process, but as a *form* of internal contradiction, of conflict of internal opposites. This form expresses the type of contradiction and is determined by

it (the contradiction), emerges on its basis, develops and decays. There is no internal contradiction without a unity of conflicting aspects within, without a general basis of conflict which expresses itself in the relative identity of opposites. But unity and identity, which are the necessary form of the movement of the contradiction, are at the same time conditioned by it as by the actual content of the development. Therefore, to regard unity, the identity of opposites, as a "reconciliation of opposites" is a direct perversion of Marxism. Yet we find this view expressed in almost identical terms by the mechanists, the reformist socialists and the Menshevik idealists.

Materialistic dialectic has nothing in common with the point of view of "reconciliation of opposites" which subordinates the conflict of opposites to a process of inevitable and pre-determined reconciliation. Materialistic dialectic which is "in essence critical and revolutionary" (Marx) understands the *resolution* of contradictions to be the replacement of one type of contradiction by another. This resolution, in which "opposites" become identified" (Lenin), expresses not the "reconciliation" but the resolution of their contradiction in a new contradiction, a new type of internal conflict.

This thought was also expressed by Lenin in his celebrated proposition on the relativity of the unity of opposites and the absoluteness of their conflict, which was neglected and not understood by the Menshevik idealists. Lenin wrote:

"The unity (the coincidence, identity, resultant force) of opposites is conditional, temporary, transitory, and relative. The struggle of the mutually exclusive opposites is absolute, as movement and evolution are."¹

For, as we see, the conflict of mutually exclusive opposites leads to a change in the character of that unity, coincidence and mutual penetration in which they are found; this conflict

¹ Lenin, vol. xiii, p. 324.

determines the character of the resolution of their contradiction. Conflict makes their internal unity conditional, temporal, transitional. Conflict leads to the final resolution of the given contradictions, to their removal, creates the beginning of a new process. In a class society, every given form of society is temporal and transitory, the change of any given form of a class society and the abolition of classes are accomplished by means of class struggle. On the developing basis of the contradiction of capitalist economy, i.e. the contradiction between the social character of production and individual appropriation, only the conflict of both mutually exclusive opposites would lead to the replacing of the original form of their unity and mutual penetration (out of which they were developing into something new) by another form. The growing intensity of the conflict of these opposites leads to the necessity of their final resolution and liquidation. This conflict creates also all the necessary conditions and possibilities for it.

Out of the thorough understanding of this aspect of dialectic proceeds the policy of our Party. The Party saw in the different forms of the bond between the proletariat and the peasantry, at the various stages of N.E.P., not a form of reconciliation of those opposites, but a form of resolution of the temporal, partial contradictions, characteristic of the given stage, and at the same time, a step forward in the resolution of the basic contradiction of the transitional period—the contradiction between socialism and capitalism. And so the Party did not make eternal the different forms of this bond between peasants and industrial workers (for this would have meant that we were oblivious of the basic contradictions of the transitional period—which was the mistake of the right deviation), nor did it regard the changing of slogans in relation to the peasantry as manoeuvres called out by the situation, allowing us to "gain time" until the final resolution of the contradiction in world socialism—which was how the Trotskyists viewed the matter.

Stalin in a speech at the Fifteenth Congress said:

"Our development proceeds, not by a smooth, unbroken movement upwards. No, comrades, we have classes, we have contradictions inside the country, we have a past, a present and a future, and the contradictions between these are still with us. We cannot therefore glide smoothly forward. Our course is one of struggle, of ever developing contradictions and of their subsequent mastery, analysis and liquidation. Never, so long as there are classes, shall we be in the position to say: Well, thank God, now all is well. Never, comrades, shall we have that state of affairs. Always in our experience something is dying out. But whatever it is, it does not like the idea of dying; it struggles to go on existing, it defends its outworn activity. Always something new is being born in our life. But whatever it is, it is not just born, it screams and cries, asserting its right to exist. . . . The struggle between the old and the new, between what is dying out and what is born—that is the basis of our movement."

Only in bitter class struggle with the capitalist elements, and in their eventual suppression, only in the proletariat's struggle for a socialist recasting of the small-individualist peasant economy (which is the last base upon which capitalism can rebuild itself), only in the struggle for the higher productivity of labour, in the struggle for the inculcation of socialist discipline can classes be abolished.

The policy of the Communist Party proceeds on the understanding that the contradiction between the Soviet Union and its backward technique, a struggle which takes place in the conditions of a *capitalist* environment, can be only temporary, that it will be resolved inevitably either by the Bolsheviks' mastery of technique or by the collapse of Soviet power.

A characteristic feature of our party is that we do not fear difficulties or contradictions, we do not flee from strife but proceed to a dispassionate analysis of the contradiction of actuality, an exposure of new contradictions, a study of

the course of their movement, of the course of preparation of conditions and possibilities for their mastery and solution.

Kaganovich, in a speech celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Institute of Red Professors, said in describing this feature of Bolshevik practice:

"What exactly does the unity of opposites mean in the ordinary language of our political party? The unity of opposites in actuality means not to be afraid of difficulties. Not to be afraid of those contradictions of life which spring up on our journey, but instead to conquer them with Bolshevik energy and staunchness."

A characteristic feature of our party is its struggle for the victory of a determined tendency of development, for the victory of one of two opposite alternatives; it is a struggle that excludes any haphazard drift.

The understanding of the absolute struggle of opposites and of the relativity of their unity distinguishes Marx-Leninism from the reformist parties. Not one theoretician of social reformism, neither Kautsky nor Plekhanov, could rise to the comprehension of movement by means of the *division of unity*, of the absoluteness of the struggle of opposites and the relativity of their unity; hence their merely formal acknowledgment and lack of comprehension of these principles. The further evolution of these theoreticians, especially Kautsky, consisted of an ever greater revision of this central aspect of materialistic dialectic. It was not a matter of chance that at the end of his life Kautsky completely rejected dialectic and declared that the theory of social movement proceeding by means of contradictions was merely "revolutionary metaphysics."

The whole political theory and tactics of the right wing of the older reformism and of modern reformist socialism are based on theories of this sort and derive from the idea of the reconciliation of opposites. Thus instead of Marx's proposition on the irreconcilability of the conflict of classes, they preach a harmony of interests of the bourgeoisie and

the proletariat, a compromise between both classes, they summon the proletariat to assist capitalist rationalization, or to support the national bourgeoisie in its struggle for a market, or to take part in bourgeois governments, etc. Instead of a struggle to overcome the contradictions of capitalism, a struggle for their forcible resolution by means of setting up a proletarian dictatorship and expropriating the bourgeoisie, they try to smooth over, to reconcile these contradictions and by that means to preserve capitalism.

The tactics of the Bolsheviks in relationship to the liberal bourgeoisie in the period of the Zemstvo campaign were expressed in the slogan "To keep separate in order to strike together." This common offensive with the liberal bourgeoisie at a determined stage and in a determined form was a relative, temporary, conditional moment in the tactics of socialism. But the Mensheviks attached to this relative moment an absolute significance and placed it at the base of all their strategy, and finally as a consequence played the part of the left wing of the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie. In 1917, the Mensheviks, Plekhanov in particular, came out as supporters of the bourgeoisie, preaching a harmony of class interests, and demanding the continuance of the imperialist war, and directed all their energy against everything that hindered the strengthening of capitalism and above all against the preparation for a socialist revolution. After October the Mensheviks directly supported the Whites. In the period of the developed advance of socialism on the whole front when the Mensheviks, overestimating the importance of the capitalist elements within the country, had dreams of a bourgeois "regeneration" of the Soviet power and were finally disappointed, they transferred their activity to direct hostility to the vital interests of the proletariat of the U.S.S.R. and to sabotage and espionage in the service of the general staffs of the imperialist powers. And all this in the name of establishing a democracy, by which they mean a society whose aim was to harmonize the interests of proletariat and bourgeoisie.

The conception of the unity of opposites as their reconciliation is also characteristic of the positions of the Right. From the Marx-Leninist position of the irreconcilability of the contradictions of the capitalist means of production they have lapsed into a theory of organized capitalism, which asserts that the contradictions within capitalist countries can be removed and transferred to an external arena, to the world market. They have formulated a theory that, all the world over, the kulak peasant economy will gradually turn into socialism. The Leninist theory of the abolition of classes by means of intensified class struggle has been replaced by a theory of the abolition of the class struggle, its peaceful dying out. They explained the intensification of class struggle in the U.S.S.R. by the "blunders of the Bolsheviks with their unwise decrees," and did not realize that the growth and advancement of socialist elements inevitably evoke the opposition of the dying capitalist elements. The Right did not see the contradictions within the peasantry itself, they represented them as a homogeneous social mass. They did not "notice" that our union with the peasantry is a union that takes account of the irreconcilability of the interests of proletariat and bourgeoisie and therefore is directed against the capitalist elements and tendencies within the peasantry.

The Right did not understand that the union of the proletariat with the peasantry is a form of the proletariat's struggle for the recasting of small-scale-commodity economy, for its transfer to the socialist path of development. They "forgot" about the temporary character of N.E.P., about its ambiguity. The right-opportunist theory, being a theory of reconciliation of opposites, leads to the perpetuation of small-scale commodity production and therefore to the perpetuation of classes. "Bukharin, the theoretician without dialectic, the scholastic theoretician" (Stalin), did not understand the doctrine of the absolute conflict of opposites and the relativity of their unity.

The view-point of reconciliation of opposites constituted the basis for that revision of Marxian dialectic which issued

from the group of Menshevist idealists. Not one of its expositors finds room to mention the absoluteness of the conflict of opposites and the relativity of their union, although they ceaselessly comment on the paragraph in Lenin's *On Dialectic* where this aspect of the "division of unity" is formulated with extraordinary accuracy and clearness. In not one of their works is a criticism of the theory of the "reconciliation of opposites" to be found. On the contrary that is the very theory from which they proceed. Thus Deborin holds that dialectical materialism "scientifically reconciles opposites, namely, freedom and necessity, subjectivism and objectivism, but reconciles them dialectically." According to him, in dialectic "subject and object, object and knowledge about the object, obtain a relative reconciliation." Deborin defines dialectic not as a doctrine of the conflict of opposites, but as a "doctrine of the merging together of opposites."

Dialectical materialism grew up in conflict with different forms of bourgeois philosophy, each of which was built upon the exaggeration and over-development of one aspect of human knowledge. But dialectical materialism did not simply cast them from the threshold, but critically worked over everything of value that had been discovered by preceding philosophy, including the rationalism and empiricism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Deborin, however, regards this critical treatment of the bourgeois heritage as a reconciliation of opposite philosophic tendencies. He holds that "dialectical materialism reconciles extreme empiricism with extreme rationalism in a higher synthesis of the two."

The theory of reconciliation of opposites is a *metaphysical* theory. Because it does not lead to the disclosure of the ways of egress from a given situation it perpetuates each given situation. Nor does it direct its attention to the origin of the new, to the creation of the new premises, possibilities, conditions, that will originate new processes on the basis of the contradictions of the given process.

The type and character of the contending opposites, the

degree of their development, define also the character of the solution of their contradiction. It is necessary to distinguish the forms of resolution of *temporary*, partial contradictions (which make possible the development of the basic contradictions of a process) from the forms of resolution of the *basic* contradictions of a process as a whole, which lead to the removal of that process. Thus the different forms of the bond between the proletariat and the peasantry in the U.S.S.R. made possible such a development of small-scale commodity production and large-scale socialist industry as prepared the way for a final resolution of the basic contradiction. And the forms of final resolution of those contradictions, which lead to the removal of the given basic contradiction, are all-round collectivization and the conversion of agricultural economy into a branch of socialist industry. The final resolution of contradictions denotes the removal of both opposite aspects. The victory of the proletariat in the socialist revolution denotes that it ceases to be a class in capitalist society and that the elements of the bourgeoisie opposed to it cease to be the class controlling the country's economy. The construction of socialism denotes the victory of the proletariat, one of the basic classes of the transitional period, and leads to the abolition of classes as a whole, including, of course, the proletariat.

The mechanists, who hold that a process develops in virtue of externally directed forces, think that the process goes in the direction of that force which predominates quantitatively. Bogdanov wrote:

"If this or that process—the movement of a body, the life of an organism, the development of society—is determined by the strife of two opposing forces, then, when one of these predominates quantitatively, however little, the process goes to its side, is subordinated in its direction. As soon as another force develops and at last equalizes itself with the first, the whole character of the process changes its quality; either it comes to an end, or later

(however small be the increase of the second force), it takes on a new direction."

Though this is basically true for mechanics, yet in the higher forms of movement it is impossible to attribute the direction of a process only to the direction of the quantitatively predominating aspect. Thus the capitalist elements at war with feudalism were at first feeble than the feudalistic elements, but the development went ever more and more in the direction of the former; the growth and strengthening of the capitalist elements resulted in the predominance of capitalism over feudalism, and the destruction of feudal relations only at the end of the process.

The socialist elements in the U.S.S.R., although at the time still very feeble, yet immediately after the October revolution played the leading rôle in the struggle with the capitalist elements. The growth of socialist elements consolidated their position and led to their victory over the capitalist elements.

The proletariat in the U.S.S.R. takes the leading rôle in union with the peasantry, which quantitatively exceeds the proletariat many times. The proletariat becomes the grave-digger of capitalism, creates a new direction for the development of productive forces, creates new forms of social relations, not simply because it increases quantitatively within the framework of capitalism, but chiefly because, in the conditions of the ever intensifying contradiction between productive forces and the capitalist relations of production, it welds itself together and organizes itself, and, under the leadership of its political party, resolves by means of revolution the capitalist productive relations and establishes proletarian dictatorship.

The mechanists' view ignores all the concrete conditions of the development of a process, all the qualitative uniqueness of its laws. This leads to drift, to a falling back on natural forces, because, from this point of view, a mere simple quantitative predominance over the weaker aspect is sufficient to ensure a new direction in development. This

view fully justifies the reformist theory of a peaceful transition from capitalism to socialism, which is to proceed from the fact of the predominance of the specific gravity of the proletariat in large-scale capitalist countries. It also fully justifies the Trotskyist denial of the possibility of a socialist victory in the U.S.S.R., in virtue of the quantitative weakness of the proletariat and the low level of productive forces in that country.

The character and direction of a process are defined by the character and direction of its basic moving contradictions—by their concrete mutual relations, by their conflict in the determined concrete situation. In the conflict of the mutually exclusive opposites, of the different tendencies of development, of the old with the new (as we saw above in more detail), one of the aspects, one of the tendencies, develops, becomes the leading one, and this defines the character and direction of a process. But this or that aspect or tendency of development becomes a leading one only through conflict. Thus in the conflict between the capitalist and socialist elements in the U.S.S.R., the socialist elements took the lead by virtue of the fact that the proletariat had established its dictatorship, had got possession of large-scale industry, were nationalizing the land, because it had established such mutual relations with the peasantry as guaranteed the support of the latter and thus prepared all the conditions and possibilities for the socialist recasting of the whole trading economy. If the dictatorship had weakened or the clearness of the general line of the party had become confused, if the opportunist elements had conquered, if there had ensued a long period of opposition to the peasantry, then the capitalist elements would have come "on top," would have begun to play the leading rôle and to annihilate the socialist elements. A less progressive tendency of development can conquer a more progressive. An old, ever more and more obstructive element, can, in fighting with a new, sustain itself for a considerable time, not allow the new to develop, and for a time even destroy it entirely. Capitalism, which hinders the development

of productive forces, at the same time maintains its own existence, does not come automatically to a crash. Only the conflict of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie resolves the question of the crash of capitalism. That is why our party carries on a very fierce war against the theory of drift, which weakens the struggle of the proletariat and by this means strengthens its opponents and makes it possible for capitalism to go on maintaining itself.