

BASIC CONCEPTS OF DIALECTICS

by Thomas Weston, from the website <http://marxistphilosophy.org>

Dialectics is the general theory of how things come into existence, change, and die out. Dialectics concentrates on processes, relations, and systems, and maintains that the main causes of the changes in processes, relationships or things are their internal conflicts (“contradictions”).

Opposition is a relationship between two things (“sides,” “aspects”) that exclude each other but are also connected, where that each side is what it is partly because of its relation to its opposite. This means, in particular, that if something were separated from its opposite (assuming that is possible), it would have to change a lot. Opposition does not automatically imply conflict.

Opposition Examples: parents and their children (this is an opposite relation, whether they are in conflict or not), the working class and the capitalist class, economic production and consumption, theory and practice.

Supplementary Opposition: Two opposite sides that support or complete each other, and do not interfere with each other.

Supplementary Opposition Examples: It is debatable whether there are real examples of this, since opposites might always interfere with each other. There are cases however, where the interference is negligible. Two unions might cooperate closely in a strike against the same employer. Credit and buying/selling can facilitate each other. The poles of a magnet seem not to interfere with each other.

Contradiction: Two opposite sides that struggle and interfere with each other, a “unity and struggle of opposites.” This is the most important concept of dialectics.

Contradiction Examples: Class struggle of capitalists and workers, theory and practice (often), basketball, attraction and repulsion inside an atom, mental and manual labor, reform and revolution.

Imperialist rivalry is a network of overlapping contradictions between imperial powers. When war gets closer, the rivals tend to form alliances that result in a single contradiction between the two groups of imperialists.

Supplementary Opposition Facts: Supplementary oppositions can turn into contradictions. Opposites that are purely supplementary (no interference at all between the two sides) might never happen, and if they do, they won't stay that way.

Interpenetration of Opposites: This means that there is never a perfectly sharp division between opposite sides, but there are borderline cases and internal connections between opposites. This is why it isn't enough to think of opposites as like opposite forces in physics.

Interpenetration Examples: The capitalist state and the capitalist economy are opposites, but U. S. Treasury officials are often Wall Street bankers. There is no sharp border between the working class and the lower levels of the capitalist class. In physics, changes in either the electrical field or the magnetic field will cause the other to change.

Dominant Side: Opposites usually have a dominant side, a side that has greater influence or power.

Dominant Side Examples: When children are young, parents dominate in the parent-child relation. The capitalist class dominates the working class (for now). Attraction dominates repulsion in the nucleus of an atom, unless it is radioactive. The capitalist class dominates the state. Question: how about the relation between thinking and material reality?

Transition into the Opposite: Typically this means (1) the dominant side shifts in an opposition, but sometimes it means that (2) something is taken over from the opposite side. Usually expressed this way: “*Under certain conditions*, something will turn into its opposite.” Not really a law, since the necessary conditions might never come about, but this is a common phenomenon.

Transition Examples: (1) Dominant side shifts: Parents grow old and their children make decisions for them. Revolution can make the working class dominant over the capitalist class, as in the October Revolution in Russia. Revolutionaries and communist parties sometimes turn into enemies of the working class, become revisionist. (2) Something is taken over from its opposite: Practice turns into theory, and theory turns into practice. As the result of a big debate in Chinese Marxist philosophy, Mao Zedong said that in appropriate conditions, thought turns into reality (by the action of political movements, for example), and reality turns into thought (as the result of learning from experience).

A **system or process** is made up of overlapping opposites. Some opposites in the capitalist system: working class vs. capitalist class, state vs. economy. In the economy: production vs. consumption, production vs. distribution, the real economy vs. finance and banking. Between states: alliances and rivalries. All of these opposites are contradictory, at least most of the time.

Contradictions Develop: *Development* of a contradiction means the two sides become more clearly distinguished and their struggle becomes more intense. Development takes place at different rates in different contradictions at different times. If there are any contradictions that don't develop at all, they are quite rare.

Examples of Development of Contradictions: Disagreements in a marriage can increase to the point that no reconciliation is possible. In the Euro crisis of 2011-2012, the contradiction between the debts of the Greek government (and other debt-heavy states) and the future income to pay those debts steadily increased. The costs of refinancing the debt grew because debt holders realized that there was a high risk of default, and therefore demanded higher interest rates.

Resolution of Contradictions: Most contradictions do not last forever. They develop, and the conflict between their two sides becomes so intense that they cannot both continue to

exist. The result is the destruction of one side (or both sides), which ends the contradiction, but produces new contradictions.

Marxists have sometimes called this process “synthesis,” but this is not a good term, since it suggests merging, rather than the victory of one side. Mao Zedong said “Synthesis is just the completed development of one side, the elimination of one side, and the resolution of the contradiction,” which is the right idea, despite the terminology (conversation with Ai Siqi, June 1964).

“Antagonistic” and “Non-Antagonistic” Contradictions: This bogus distinction was part of the dialectic thought of the socialist countries, beginning about 1930. “Non-antagonistic” contradictions were supposed to be ones that die out without becoming more intense or destroying either side of the contradiction. Historical experience shows that this did not happen in the socialist states. Their internal contradictions became intense and destroyed the socialist system. This distinction should be rejected outright, rather than saying that all contradictions are antagonistic.

Contradictions Among the People and Contradictions with the Enemy: This is an important distinction which is not the same as the supposed distinction between antagonistic and non-antagonistic contradictions. The methods for resolving contradictions within a collective are not the same as those for resolving contradictions between that collective and its enemies, even if both tend to become more intense. Mao’s error was to say that the “among the people” contradictions are “non-antagonistic,” that is, don’t tend to become more intense, which is false. Fighting to eliminate wrong ideas and actions inside a collective is not usually the same thing as defeating particular people, showing them up or kicking them out.

Quality and Quantity: Dialectical contradiction is the *central concept* of dialectical philosophy. Dialectics also has other laws that help explain what happens in processes that are driven forward by contradictions. A **quantity** is a property that can be more or less, and usually can be measured in numbers, like temperature, age, hourly wage, rate of profit, amount of leaflets distributed, etc. A **quality** is a property that is either present or not present, and does not come in degrees, like being square, beautiful, green, unemployed, at war, etc.

Qualitative Change and Quantitative Change

Change of *quantity* usually goes through intermediate stages. Change of *quality* can often happen quickly, without going through intermediate stages. When you heat water, its temperature (a quantity) gradually increases. At a certain temperature bubbles suddenly appear and boiling starts. The change from not-boiling to boiling is a qualitative change. General principle: If quantitative change continues far enough, it will produce a qualitative change.

Quantity and Quality Examples: Intensification of imperialist rivalry leads to war, increasing distribution of political literature can make a qualitative political change in a workplace, growth of the working class movement can shift the main contradiction in the world from imperialist vs. imperialist to workers vs. capitalists.

Note: Contradiction is more important than qualitative change. It is a mistake in dialectics to emphasize qualitative change and play down contradiction. Both Trotsky and Bukharin did this, and despite his misleading “contradiction” terminology so did Althusser.

Dialectical Negation: The result of a qualitative change (or a transition into the opposite), a significant phase in the history of a process or system.

Dialectical Negation Examples: A worker getting a job (unemployment is replaced by employment), ice melts, a seed turns into a plant, an empire is destroyed, an anti-capitalist revolution.

Negation of the Negation: One dialectical negation followed by a second dialectical negation. The general principle is that when this double negation happens, the result may be similar in some ways to the original situation, but will also be different in some significant way.

Negation of the Negation Examples: Melt an ice cube and freeze it again. It won't be exactly the same as the original cube. After the failure of socialism, Marxist revolutions won't repeat past errors, but will probably make some new ones. Marx's example: Communist revolution "expropriates the expropriators," but doesn't lead to a new expropriation.

Why Negation of the Negation matters: (1) There are no circles in history. There are partial reverses, which also have new features. (2) Sometimes people speak of the second negation as repeating the original situation "on a higher level." "Higher" does not mean better, but it does mean that human actors can take advantage of historical experience, and try to produce a better result. (3) The differences in the current situation, compared with that before two negations, can make big differences. We need to make use of ideas and examples from the earlier history of the communist movement, but also to pay attention to new factors that will produce different results.

January 3, 2012.

"Basic Concepts of Dialectics," by Thomas Weston. From the website <http://marxistphilosophy.org> This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/).

Permissions beyond the scope of this license may be available at diamat@nym.hush.com.