

Dialectics: The Philosophy of Struggle

by Andrew Narr, June 2009

Dialectics is the philosophy of change and development, advanced by Marx and Engels and developed further in the Soviet and Chinese revolutions. It is an important tool for understanding how the capitalist system works, and what its fatal weaknesses are. This article is an introduction to the basic ideas of dialectics, applied to some of the important events now taking place (June, 2009).

The Unity of Opposites: The Basis of Dialectics

The most important concept of dialectics is the *unity and struggle of opposites*. This means two things or processes which are connected, but which interfere with each other. This kind of combination of unity and struggle is called a “dialectical contradiction.”

In the capitalist system, the most important dialectical contradiction is the unity and conflict between the working class and the capitalist class, but there are much simpler social examples. A basketball game is a contradiction between two teams that are united in a single game, with each side playing defense and trying to hold the other back.

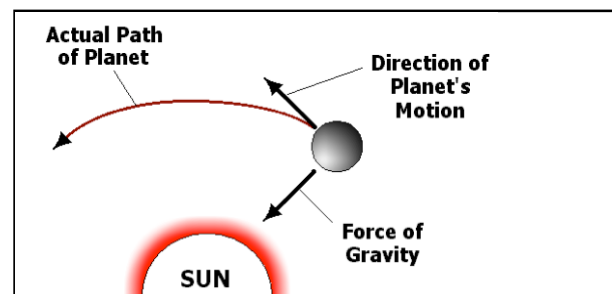
Contradictions also occur everywhere in nature, like the forces of attraction and repulsion inside an atom. Capitalist competition is a network of contradictions between capitalists who try to outdo each other in the market. The rivalries of capitalists of different imperialist countries, who are competing for control of resources and labor for maximum profits, are in contradiction with each other. In the working class movement, there are political contradictions like militant versus sell-out unionism or reform versus revolution, as well as religious, racial and national conflicts, etc.

Contradictions Cause Change

Contradictions are important because they make things change. The internal back and forth struggle of the two sides of the contradiction causes change, and point that change in a particular direction. As long as capitalism lasts, the contradiction between workers and capitalists pushes capitalist society toward crisis and revolution. The contradiction between two

teams in a basketball game drives both teams to play harder. Contradictions inside an atom can make it break up into smaller atoms.

Marx wrote that contradictions “create a form in which they can move themselves.” They direct the motion they cause so that the clash of the opposite sides is minimized. As an example, Marx described the motion of a planet around the Sun. This elliptical motion is the result of two contradictory tendencies, one to keep going straight ahead, and one to move toward the Sun.



Contradictions Become Resolved

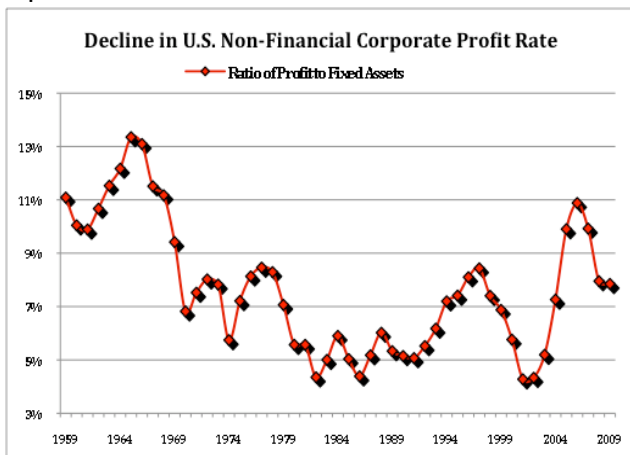
Contradictions cause change, but they don't last forever. Eventually they get *resolved*, that is, they stop being contradictions. When the buzzer sounds in the basketball game, the game ends and the contradiction is resolved until the next game. Most contradictions don't end this way, however. There is no referee to call time on class struggle under capitalism. The contradictions of capitalism will only be ended if capitalism ends. In the process of eliminating capitalism, however, new contradictions will arise. When contradictions are resolved, new ones are always created.

Contradictions Develop

A critical question of dialectics is how contradictions behave over time. Pro-capitalists or revisionists (fake Leftists) often claim that the two sides of a contradiction can “peacefully coexist” for a long time. Union big shots discourage strikes and accept positions on corporate boards, promoting the illusion that workers don't have to fight the capitalists, but can “share governance.” As the current capitalist economic crisis deepens, celebrity politicians

like Obama and Villaraigosa claim that “we are all in this together,” and should accept “shared sacrifices.”

In fact the contradictions of capitalism don't work this way. They tend to develop and *become more intense*, bringing the conflict out in the open and making the stakes higher. The “peaceful coexistence” line is wrong because it emphasizes only the unity of the two sides of a contradiction, and ignores their struggle. Over the long haul, however, most contradictions tend to become more intense, and struggle becomes their more important aspect. This was Lenin's point in his famous statement that “The unity ... of opposites is conditional, temporary, transitory, relative. The struggle of mutually exclusive opposites is absolute, just as development and motion are absolute.”



The Falling Rate of Profit

One of the reasons identified by Marx that the contradictions of capitalism tend to become sharper is the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. This means that the rate of profit on each dollar invested tends to get smaller over time. Because of competition, each capitalist must try to produce things more cheaply than the next one. Individual capitalists lower production costs by introducing more complex technology into production, thereby reducing the number of workers. Other capitalists are then forced to automate in order to keep up. The result is a much larger amount of money sunk into technology. More money spent on machinery means a lower rate of profit because of one key fact: Workers' labor is the source of all value. Profits are *only* made from

workers labor, by capitalists making workers produce much more value than the workers get in wages. The value produced by the labor that capitalists don't pay for is called “surplus value,” and it is the ultimate source of profit, interest, and rent.

Elements of a Dialectical Contradiction

1. A dialectical contradiction must have a pair of *opposite properties, tendencies, forces or requirements*.
2. The opposites must be *united* within a single thing, process, or system. This is the **unity** of the contradiction
3. These opposite sides must each actively work against or interfere with one another. This is, the **struggle** of its opposite sides of the contradiction

Together, these properties define a dialectical contradiction as a **unity of opposites**.

There are several ways that capitalists can try to counteract the fall in the rate of profit, like reducing the wages of workers. Capitalists can do this directly, or they can move production to areas that already have lower wages, like the southern U. S., Mexico, or Asia. The U.S. automakers, for example, have been making cars and car parts in Mexico and Brazil for a long time. This not only means that they can hire workers for less in those countries, but the threat of moving jobs away helps the auto bosses keep U. S. workers' wages down. Inside the U. S., capitalists are also reducing wages by making greater use of racism, super-exploiting a section of the working class, for example, by increased use of immigrant labor in basic industries. This is particularly true of companies that outsource production to lower wage, non-union shops. The result of all these changes has been a significant decline in wages and cutbacks in benefits since the 1970s.

This intensifying contradiction between workers and capitalists can be seen in the current economic crisis. As they try cope with the weaknesses of their system, capitalists are in-

creasing their pressure on workers, laying them off, cutting back their health care and education, foreclosing on their houses, and sending them off to wars like Iraq and Afghanistan for capitalists' profits and resources.

Right now California is going ahead with plans to take away health care from *one million children*, and making massive layoffs of teachers. No "truce" is going to happen here. While we should join in the resistance to cuts and layoffs that is now taking place against these attacks, this certainly will not be able to prevent things from getting worse for workers and students. The weaker the U. S. capitalists get, the less room they have to make concessions to angry workers. Major reforms are less and less possible, and the future holds only more misery, war and further steps toward fascism until capitalism ends, resolving the worker-capitalist contradiction.

As bad as these intensifying contradictions are for workers and students, they also represent an opportunity for the growth of opposition to capitalism. More people are questioning the system and are open to a Marxist analysis of it. The same is true of the Obama administration's major escalation of the war in Afghanistan, as the contradictions of the economy drive the U. S. capitalists to greater efforts to control the world's main sources of oil and gas.

One Side of a Contradiction Is Dominant

In the conflict between the two sides of a contradiction, one side is almost always dominant. Situations where the two sides are "even" are rare and temporary. But the dominant side does not have to stay dominant. The side that is dominant needs to fight to stay on top. The other side fights to gain the upper hand. Neither side can afford to simply give in.

For example, capitalists in competition with each other have to do whatever it takes to keep up with the competition. Even capitalists who are in a strong position for the moment know that they can be done in by competition. General Motors was riding high for decades, but has finally lost out to its competitors, especially to Toyota, and went into bankruptcy. Imperialist countries of the past, like Spain or Britain, who were dominant for a while, have ended up as minor powers. They lost out in the

struggle and their imperial power was destroyed. Now the U. S. empire is facing increasing challenges from Russia, China and Europe. While it remains the dominant power, that situation can change.

How Contradictions are Resolved

The biggest issue in dialectics is how contradictions are resolved. Marx said that resolution only happens when the two sides "fight to a decision," and one wins, for example, when the working class defeats the capitalists. Right-wing philosophers claim that the two sides don't have to fight until one wins, but could merge into a so-called "synthesis." A synthesis is supposed to contain both sides in such a way that they no longer interfere with each other. Throughout the history of Marxism, support for one of these two lines on dialectics -- "fighting to a decision" or "synthesis"--has marked the difference between revolutionary politics and revisionism, that is, capitalist politics posing as Leftist. In the 1960s, after capitalism was restored in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev, Soviet philosophers claimed that contradictions can be resolved by "merging," without one side destroying another. In China, Mao Zedong attacked this idea by describing how the communist movement in China had defeated the capitalist forces: "their armies came, and we devoured them, we ate them bite by bite.... it was not the synthesis of two peacefully coexisting opposites. They didn't want to coexist peacefully, they wanted to devour you." Now that capitalism has been restored in China, the "philosophy of struggle" that Mao advocated is being replaced with a "philosophy of harmony" that China's capitalist rulers use to try to suppress resistance to their rule. Although these fakers won't admit it, the truth is that contradictions are only resolved by their internal struggle becoming more intense, as Marx put it, "fighting to a decision."

Shifting the Dominant Side: Qualitative Change

Even when a contradiction is not ready to be resolved by one side wiping out the other, it is possible to change the dominant side by strengthening the weaker side. The result is a qualitative change. This is what happens in a successful revolution. The defeated side does

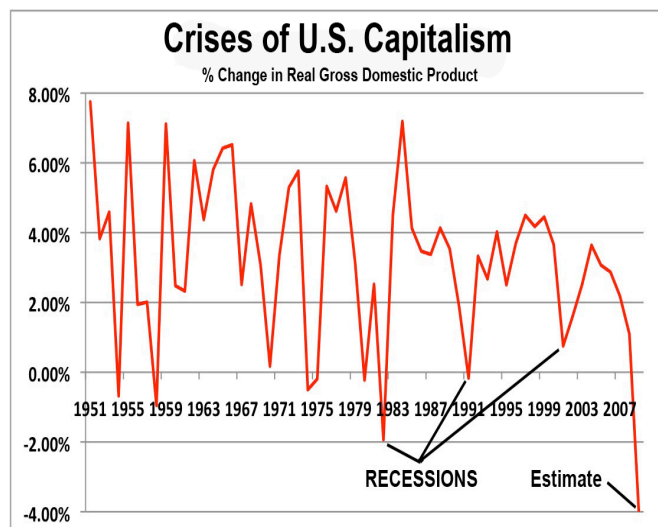
not immediately disappear, but has become much weaker. Old classes and their ideas and organizations can still exist and try to make a comeback. This is what happened in both Russia and China. The working class became the dominant side, but didn't finish the job. The empire was able to strike back.

Shifting the dominant side means changing the quality of a contradictory relation or process. Although it can be reversed, it is often important to fight for this kind of change. If you are active in a union or mass organization, you should be fighting to win people to a Marxist outlook, undermining pro-capitalist leaders. Winning more people to these ideas increase the quantity of support for the Left within that organization, and that increase in *quantity* can eventually cause a change in *quality*, toward Left leadership. This is an important example of a law of dialectics: *changing quantity eventually changes quality*. This principle works because weakening the dominant side or strengthening the weaker side will eventually shift which one is dominant, and change quality. The principle works in such homely examples as boiling water by adding heat, but it also has a profound application, that the growth of the working class movement will eventually lead to the qualitative change of revolution.

Internal Contradictions are Primary

The history of class society, the *Communist Manifesto* said, is the "history of class struggle," the conflict of the social groups inside society that have opposite relationships to production. This means that social change does not come about primarily by factors outside society, like climate or environmental processes, although these things certainly make a difference. Instead, the effect that external factors have on capitalist society is mainly determined by factors internal to capitalism.

This situation is not peculiar to society, but is generally true. What happens to a thing almost always depends mainly on its internal relationships, and how it changes and what it becomes are due primarily to its internal contradictions. Although external conditions make a difference, it is mainly the internal contradictions in a process or system that determines how it will change.



Internal Contradictions and Financial Crisis

The principle that their internal contradictions primarily determine how things change is especially important for understanding capitalist financial crises and recessions. The current financial crisis is a particular kind of crisis of overproduction, which might be called an "over accumulation" crisis. This means that there was more financial capital in circulation than could find a profitable way to reproduce itself. At the same time, there is a somewhat different crisis of overproduction in the real, non-financial economy. As the recession deepens, a huge volume of products goes unsold. The automakers are offering big discounts, but there are many more cars than there are buyers, and GM and Chrysler have gone bankrupt.

It is a basic feature of the capitalist system that booms are followed by recessions or depressions, when the over-produced commodities can't be sold at a profit. The tendency to overproduction is a permanent feature of capitalism, which results from an aspect of the system Marx called the "anarchy of capitalist production." This means that decisions on what and how to produce are not coordinated among capitalists, but result from the conflicts of competing firms trying to outdo each other. Their conflicts drive capitalists to expand production (or accumulation) too far, until a recession or depression results. This happens roughly every 8 years, with some much larger than others.

Another way to describe the anarchy of capitalist production is that capitalists have in-

ternal contradictions among themselves about how to exploit the working class. These conflicts not only lead to overproduction, but to some apparently crazy behavior. When bankers make huge investments backed by mortgages that were taken out by people who can't afford to pay, they know that they are taking big risks. If their competitors are making money in these high-risk investments, however, they have to do the same or lose out to the competition. Competitive contradictions, which are built into capitalism, can drive production and investment to new heights, but they also result in crisis and destruction.

The internal is also primary in determining the growth of the movement opposed to capitalism. Internal factors such as its political line, its composition, its leadership and its size mainly determine how it grows. Probably the most important thing to understand about internal contradictions for practical political work is that *the movement's own weaknesses hold it back more than external conditions*.

This means that victory is only possible by making a determined struggle to overcome internal weaknesses. But you can't struggle against weaknesses you don't know about or don't face up to, so the struggle against them requires being honest and self-criticism.

Underlying Contradictions

Contradictions do not have to be easy to see in order to have a powerful influence on what happens. They can be part of underlying reality that only becomes recognizable in certain circumstances. The contradiction between the working class and the capitalist class is a permanent feature of the capitalist system. Although they are locked into the same system, the working class and the capitalist class always struggle against each other, whether or not the visible symptoms of this struggle, like layoffs, strikes, education cuts, etc. are occurring at the moment. The contradiction between two capitalist powers is obvious when they go to war, but long before the shooting starts, the contradictions in their interests, which is what makes them enemies, have usually been becoming more intense for a long time. The struggle of the U. S. and its major oil companies to dominate the Persian Gulf area is over

50 years old, and U. S. contradictions with other imperialist powers over who controls Iraqi oil have existed for decades, long before the 2003 U. S. invasion, when the contradiction became obvious.

The Main Contradiction

Any real process or system has lots of contradictions, but some are far more important than others. The *main contradiction* of a system is the one that—for the time being—has the biggest effect on how that system changes. The main contradiction in the world today is between the U. S. empire and its various imperial rivals. The weaknesses exposed by the U. S. failure in Iraq have encouraged other powers to challenge the U. S.: Russian-U. S. conflicts about Central Asian oil are intensifying, China is competing for oil everywhere, Chavez and other Latin American nationalists are taking advantage of U. S. weakness.

Although the main contradiction in the world now is between capitalist rivals, that doesn't mean that working class resistance or potential activism is not an important factor. To strengthen its side of this main contradiction, the U.S. capitalists need to win over workers, soldiers, and students to believe that the U. S. empire is a good thing for them. One of the ways capitalists try to promote "loyalty" to the U. S. bosses is by building patriotism in reform movements. The job of the Left in these reform movements is not only to fight against racism and imperialist war, but also to get people to see that, like all capitalists, liberal bosses need to promote racism and war. This struggle is critical to increasing the strength of the working class, which can shift the main contradiction in the world from inter-imperialist rivalry to the class conflict between the united working class and the capitalists. Winning this fight is the only way to overcome the wars, racism, misery, and insecurity that are built into capitalism, and replace it with workers' power and equality. To understand and be effective in this struggle, we need to study the philosophy of dialectics and as Mao said, "liberate philosophy from the confines of the philosophers' lecture rooms and textbooks," and turn it into a weapon in the hands of millions.