

Chapter 7

Primary and Secondary Contradictions

“[I] have always needed the spur of contradiction.”¹

7.1 Introduction

When asked, in 1954 which book he read the previous year had the most impact on him, Brecht indicated it was Mao Tse Tung’s *On Contradiction* (Brooker 1988). My analysis of Brecht’s philosophical thought suggests it is Mao’s treatment of higher order antagonisms, that is, between ‘dominant’ and ‘secondary’ contradictions that appealed to Brecht. In fact, Brecht used Mao’s treatise as a means of teaching others, particularly his cast about ‘dominant’ and ‘secondary’ contradictions. One primary source, in particular, a transcribed dialogue, “Study of the First Scene of Shakespeare’s ‘Coriolanus’” attests to Brecht using Mao’s treatise in this manner (BT: 252-65). In this dialogue, Brecht makes reference to having asked his collaborators to read *On Contradiction* and their responses indicate that they did.

I begin with a discussion of Mao’s concept of ‘dominant’ and ‘secondary’ antagonisms. Next, I will show how this concept influenced Brecht’s adaptation of *Coriolanus*², (Brecht, Willett & Manheim 1972) by using specific examples from primary sources and the text itself. This chapter will thus reveal Brecht’s belief in the concept and demonstrate how Brecht was able to concretely depict it for his audience.

¹ Journals: 6 [1938].

² This play was written circa 1953 and was first published in 1959, three years after Brecht’s death (Brecht, Willett & Manheim 1972). It was first staged at the Frankfurt Schauspielhaus, in 1962 (Willett 1977).

7.2 Mao's Concept of 'Dominant' and 'Secondary' Contradictions

According to Mao, a process of development has many contradictions. However, within a process of development there is always one principal or dominant contradiction. Mao states, for example, that the principal contradiction in bourgeois society is between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat (Mao 1967: 31). The other contradictions, in a process of development "occupy a secondary and subordinate position" according to Mao (1967: 31). Although, for Mao, there is always one dominant and various secondary contradictions, the relations between them are not always static. The principal and a non-principal contradiction can shift positions. That is, the dominant contradiction can be "temporarily relegated to a secondary and subordinate position" (Mao 1967: 32). This occurs when the reactionary forces of a historic antagonism which have not fully been reconciled threaten the present level of historical progression. Mao highlights, for example, the contradiction between the remnant feudal class and the bourgeoisie, in bourgeois society. As was mentioned above, the contradiction between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is the dominant contradiction in bourgeois society. The contradiction between the remnant feudal class and the bourgeoisie, then, would constitute a secondary contradiction. If however the reactionary feudal forces threatened the progress made by bourgeois society the feudal-bourgeois contradiction would become primary and the proletariat-bourgeois contradiction would be temporarily relegated to a secondary position.

Brecht and his associates were definitely aware of these ideas. Evidence for this exists in the allusions to reading *On Contradiction* and the discussion on it found in "Study of the First Scene of Shakespeare's 'Coriolanus.'" Moreover, an analysis of Brecht's *Coriolanus* indicates that these ideas were also incorporated in the text of Brecht's adaptation.

7.3 'Dominant' and 'Secondary' Contradictions in Brecht's *Coriolanus*

Brecht made several important changes in his adaptation of *Coriolanus*. As Scofield points out, in Brecht's version *Coriolanus* and the rest of the Patricians are more aggressive with their hostility toward the Plebeians (Scofield 2006). It is Coriolanus' exhibition of this hostility which causes the Plebeians to turn against him. This is, of course, a deviation from Shakespeare's text which attributes the Plebeians' changed opinion of Coriolanus to the craftiness of the tribunes. Brecht's version treats the tribunes in a more