

The Law of the Negation of the Negation

Selections on the concept of synthesis, from Dialekticheskii materializm [Dialectical Materialism], by A. Aizenberg, K. Egorova, M. Zhiv, K. Sedikov, G. Tymianskii, and R. Iankovskii, under the general editorship of A. Aizenberg, G. Tymianskii, and N. Shirokov, Leningrad: ORGIZ-Privoi, 1931, written as a textbook. This work was translated into Chinese by Li Da and Lei Zhongjian in 1933, and studied by Chinese Marxists, including Mao Zedong.

[185] From the preceding exposition we already know that dialectical processes are presented as processes which jump through transitions of quality-quantity development, on the basis of the movement of their opposites. But dialectical processes of development in reality and in our cognition are not exhausted by the law of the transition from quantity into quality and conversely, and the law of the unity of opposites. Along with these two basic laws of dialectics, we have a third basic law of dialectics with substantiation from Marx and Engels--the law of the negation of the negation.

What is the essence of this law?

In the first volume of *Capital*, in the chapter on "The Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation," Marx indicated the path of development the path of development of private property in the means of labor from its original moments up to its historically inevitable destruction, to its transition into its opposite--social property....

[186] Showing the path of the origin of capitalist private property, the *negation* of small private property, Marx revealed the tendency of its development....

[187] Indicating the entire course of the historical development of private property, Marx found the following result, in which the law of the negation of the negation is also formulated:

"... capitalist private property," he wrote, "is the first negation of individual private property, based on individual labor. But capitalist production, with the inevitability of a natural process, gives rise to its own negation. This is the negation of the negation. It does not recreate private property, but individual property on the basis of the achievement of the capitalist era: cooperation and common possession of the earth and the means of production produced through labor itself."¹

We will try to work out the concrete content of this law. We will begin with a critique of those views which ascribe to this law a significance alien to it.

Critics, attacking Marxism, accuse it of maintaining that development is performed according to Hegelian triads. According to them, development takes place in the following way. At the beginning of the development of any process, it appears as a thesis, as something positive. This thing generates its own

¹ K. Marx, *Kapital*, *Marx Engels Werke (MEW)*, Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1956--, vol. 23, p. 791, or *Karl Marx Frederick Engels Collected Works (MECW)*, New York: International Publishers, 1976--, vol. 35, p. 751.

particular opposite--its antithesis. Further development unifies, in a way, the thesis and antithesis, that is, comes out as a synthesis. Thus development of any object takes places in three stages which form a "triad": thesis, antithesis, synthesis. By these positions Hegel wanted to confirm the law of development through the struggle of opposites, transition of one phenomenon into another, its opposite, and transition of the former into such opposite, in which is included both preceding stages of development. Hegel's positions contain profound thinking, which was grasped and developed by Marx and Engels. Engels wrote that the negation of the negation -- "a very simple procedure, performed everywhere every day, which every child can understand as soon as the mysterious junk in which the old idealistic philosophy wrapped itself is stripped off [...]"² But it is just metaphysical philosophy which also does not see anything in the law of the negation of the negation other than mystical [188] junk. The law of the negation of the negation is depicted by metaphysics as a schematic "triad," which Marxists fit to the development concrete reality by force. True, it is necessary to say that Hegel himself gave grounds, particularly in his *Philosophy of Right*, to interpret "triplicity" as a law of development itself, and not merely as an aspect of the law of the negation of the negation. Thus he considered crime as the negation of law, and punishment as the negation of crime, that is, as the negation of the negation. Here the triad actively entered as an external schema, which drives the phenomena of reality. It would also be possible to say that the struggle for existence in organic nature takes place according to a triad: insects are eaten by birds (thesis and antithesis), but birds are eaten by predators (synthesis). A kind of unification of the world of insects and the world of birds arises in the stomach of the predator arises.

Certainly, such schematic behavior of phenomena according to a triad could not explain development....

[193] In the development of a plant, the seed, a manifestation of its growth, appears as the negation of it, *i.e.*, the negation of the negation. But seeds are generated by the development of the plant, they constitute a moment of the plant, a moment which signifies the goal of the development of the plant. The plant rots, the seed remains. The cycle of development is finished.

Kautsky is puzzled: what is this negation of the negation where simultaneously there are both a plant (negation of a seed) and a seed (the negation of the negation, that is, of the plant). As a mechanist he would want to tear apart these two stages, and afterwards would be surprised when he found no development.

Meanwhile the essence of both negation and the negation of the negation consists in this, that they appear as moments in the contradictory development of a process.

² [See F. Engels, *Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science*, Karl Mark Frederick Engels Collected Works, New York: International Publishers, 1976--, vol. 25, p. 125, or *Herrn Eugen Dührings Umwälzung der Wissenschaft*, Marx Engels Werke, Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1956--, vol. 20, p. 126.--Editor]

Such a dialectical understanding of the negation is different from the mechanical, metaphysical bare negation.

Now we can show that the difference of the two opposite interpretations of the law of the negation of the negation consists in different interpretations of the problem of the origin of the new.

In his setting of the question of overcoming a thesis and an antithesis in a synthesis, Hegel revealed a dialectical path of development, leading to the manifestation of new laws. The problem of historical synthesis is also a problem of the origin of the new. We will try to explain this, showing that it is precisely here that the essence of the law of the negation of the negation is revealed.

Can metaphysical negation explain the origin of the new? We already saw in separate critiques dedicated to the mechanists misunderstanding of the law of the unity of opposites and the law of the transition from quantity to quality and conversely, that the mechanists cannot resolve the problem of development. Reducing all qualitative characteristics to quantitative relations, they reduce all development to mechanical movement, that is, displacement of particles. The new is manifested as a arrangement of particles in a new combination of elements. The new can always be reduced to the old by means of decomposition into primary elements. Consequently, the new, synthesis, does not differ in its quality, in its developmental tendencies [zakonomernosti] from the old. Such a methodology cannot explain the origin of the new.

We call the “vulgar evolutionary theory” that broadly conceived point of view similar in character to this conception of development. According to this conception, the new is entirely contained in the old, only at microscopic dimensions. Development is simply quantitative increase [194] or decrease. The new grows out of the old according to the laws of mechanics. The old is diminished, the new increases. Socialism grows within the bosom of capitalism. Capitalism is diminished. The forces of the proletariat grow, the capitalist forces are not developed and grow weaker; finally, capitalism yields to socialism without bloody revolution. Negating breaks in continuity, jumps, the vulgar evolutionary theory reveals neither the essence of the new nor the causes of its manifestation.

Not able either to pose or to solve the problem of historical synthesis, mechanist methodology does not reveal the essence of the law of the negation of the negation, reducing it to a “triad.” Reduction of the negation of the negation to a “triad” is characteristic of those who are not found in the camp of dialectics. It is characteristic that, performing this operation, Kautsky doubts in “that the development of the whole world, both organic and inorganic, fits into the scheme in question.”

For Bukharin, on the other hand, from the characteristics of his schematism, all development fits under the “triad” scheme. In *The Theory of Historical Materialism*, he attempts to show how development takes place. Reducing the struggle of opposites to the struggle of opposite forces, Bukharin palms off equilibrium on us, instead of the unity of opposites based on their struggle. What is more, he declared that all dialectics reduces to the theory of equilibrium. Bukharin wrote on this subject: “Hegel noted that character of movement and expressed it in the following form: the original content of

equilibrium he called the thesis, disturbed equilibrium he called the antithesis, the re-establishment of equilibrium he called the synthesis (a unifying condition, in which contradictions are reconciled). Just this character of movement, existing everywhere, fitting into a three-way formula ("triad"), he also called dialectical."³

Thus all development is reduced to a "triad," the triad is reduced to equilibrium, its disturbance and re-establishment, and synthesis is reduced to the reconciliation of opposites. It is understandable that Bukharin does not solve the problem of the new. We already know what political conclusions his theory of equilibrium and reconciliation of opposites led Bukharin toward. The theory of a snails pace on the path to socialism, the growth of the kulak cooperative nests into socialism, equilibrium in the struggle of the two sectors in the USSR, reconciliation in the class struggle of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie--this is the historical synthesis, which also had to denote a new basis of development. Under the first successes of socialist construction, which evoked furious resistance from the class enemy, rightists began to shout about the disturbance of equilibrium [195] and of the necessity of its re-establishment. Synthesis must happen on a new basis. This "new" basis, in the opinion of the rightists, was a return to the NEP [New Economic Policy] of 1923. In reality such synthesis is a reactionary justification for the necessity of remaining in the old framework and merely touching up the old.

Consequently, vulgar evolutionary theory, based on mechanist methodology, cannot explain the origin of the new, or reveal the essence of the problem of historical synthesis, which is also the essence of the law of the negation of the negation.

Negation of the negation, synthesis, the new--these arise not by means of simple unification, agreement, reconciliation, or combination of opposites. This mechanical interpretation of synthesis is nothing other than eclecticism. When Lenin describes the discussion on the trade unions and brings out two basic struggling points of view, he clearly emphasizes eclecticism of Bukharin, who made the proposal to unify the thesis approved by the Central Committee and Trotsky's thesis. Lenin pointed out that the essence of the question was not in the means to unify the two points of view. Every object and phenomenon has many contradictory sides and definite characteristics. However, in a concrete situation it is important to find the new, that leading element that enters into the interaction of these sides. An eclectic does not know how to reveal this new, leading source.

On the question of synthesis Menshivist idealism⁴ group is rolled up in the mechanist position. It suffices to speak of Deborin, who understood by synthesis the merger [sliianie] of opposites sides. Deborin portrays dialectical materialism as a synthesis of empiricism and rationalism, French materialism and Hegelian

³ [See N. Bukharin, *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969, p.p. 74-5. The attribution to Hegel is incorrect. Hegel did not use the terminology "thesis, antithesis, synthesis" to describe his own views, but only when discussing the views of other philosophers, such as Kant and Fichte.--Editor]

⁴ [Literally "Menshevizing idealism." The term was applied to Avram Deborin and his students, and implied that their view was linked with the political ideas of the Menshevik faction of the Russian Social Democrats.--Editor]

idealist dialectics. It is enough to indicate in this that to conceive what is new, the essence of Marxism-Leninism under such a formulation of the question is not revealed.⁵

Synthesis is historical synthesis. Only a concrete analysis can show how opposites are overcome in synthesis and to what extent they are “preserved.” Analyzing the theory of knowledge of dialectical materialism, we are convinced that it is not at all a synthesis of empiricism and rationalism. Dialectical materialism overcomes the one-sidedness of empiricism and rationalism, pulling apart the experiential and logical moments of a single process of cognition. Dialectical materialism does not negate the empirical and rational moments in cognition, but by no means preserves empiricism and rationalism as tendencies. [196] It is quite characteristic of Menshivist idealism that, while criticizing those who saw “triadness” in the law of the negation of the negation, it did not manage to pose the question of synthesis correctly itself.

Thus the essence of synthesis consists in this, that it expresses the origin of the new. The new arises through a jump. The negation of the negation also expresses this break in continuity, manifesting new developmental tendencies, which overcomes the old form of the contradiction. The old contradiction is overcome in synthesis.

The NEP was the negation of War Communism. But the NEP did not mean the negation of socialist construction, but only a particular form of its development. Socialism in its developed form overcomes a contradiction, and signifies the negation of the negation. But if the negation took place on the basis of the developmental tendencies of the transition period, then the negation of the negation means the transition to new developmental tendencies, those of socialism.

The law of the negation of the negation is a concrete form of the law of the unity of opposites, that is, the law of the struggle of opposites and the resolution of their contradiction. Engels also saw in this the essence of the law of the negation of the negation. He wrote: “The true, natural, historical, and dialectical negation is (formally) the moving source of all development--the division into opposites, their struggle and resolution, and what is more, on the basis of experience gained, the original point is achieved again (partly in history, fully in thought), but at a higher stage.”⁶ Thus the essence of the law of the negation of the negation, the essence of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis in the division of unity, in the struggle of opposites and in the resolution of this contradiction, that is, in the origin of new developmental tendencies. “Processes,” Engels wrote in *Anti-Dühring*, “which have an antagonistic nature contain a contradiction inside them. The transformation of one extreme into its opposites and, finally, as the basis of everything, the negation of the negation.”⁷

⁵ [reading ‘vskryvaetsia’ for ‘skryvaetsia’.]

⁶ [See F. Engels, Preparatory Materials for *Anti-Dühring*, *Karl Mark Frederick Engels Collected Works*, New York: International Publishers, 1976--, vol. 25, pp. 606-7, --Editor]

⁷ [See F. Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, *Karl Mark Frederick Engels Collected Works*, New York: International Publishers, 1976--, vol. 25, pp. 130, or *Herrn Eugen Dührings Umwälzung der Wissenschaft*, *Marx Engels Werke*, Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1956--, vol. 20, p. 131.--Editor]

[197] With the Greeks dialectics was not developed and not based on the development of all sciences. The return to dialectics takes place on a new basis, on the basis of a wealth of the development of empirical knowledge, natural and social science. What is the relationship of a synthesis with its preceding stages? On the relation of thesis and antithesis, Greek philosophy and metaphysics, Engels wrote: "If the metaphysics of the Greeks was right in the end about individuals, then the Greeks were on the whole right in the end about metaphysics."⁸ Synthesis also consists in the return to the whole, enriched and differentiated in the development of all the sciences.

Thus synthesis overcomes the previous stages within it, as if returning to the thesis, but to a thesis enriched by the development of the antithesis. In such an interpretation the return to the beginning also constitutes the difference between the dialectical theory of development and the mechanist theory of cycles....

[198] In place of the mechanist theory of cycles, dialectics is based on the theory of development in spirals. Development is completed in a circle, but the end point of the circle does not coincide with the beginning, but comes to above initial point further development, consequently as the thesis of a new cyclic process.

Why does the synthesis become the initial point of new movement? Why, for example, does Marx's theory become the initial point in the development of a self-conscious proletariat, its science, its culture? Because, Lenin answers, "that Marx based on the firm foundation of human knowledge, conquered under capitalism... Marx understood the inevitable development of capitalism, leading to communism ... with the help of the full adoption of everything provided by preceding science. Everything which has been created by human society, he critically reworked, not one point remained without consideration. Everything which has been created by human thought, he reworked, subjected to criticism, took into the workers' movement, and followed the conclusions which people within the confines of the bourgeois framework or the linked with bourgeois preconceptions were not able to make."⁹

Development goes in spirals. Returning to the initial point is returning to a higher form, but differencing in its wealth of content, in its inner structure.

⁸ [See F. Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, *Karl Marx Frederick Engels Collected Works*, New York: International Publishers, 1976--, vol. 25, pp. 341, or *Dialektik der Natur*, *Marx Engels Werke*, Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1956--, vol. 20, p. 333.--Editor].

⁹ [V. I. Lenin, "On the Tasks of the Youth Organization," Speech at the 3rd All-Russian Congress of the Russian Communist Youth Organization, October 2, 1920, *Collected Works*, (Russian Edition), vol. 41, p. 304.--Editor]